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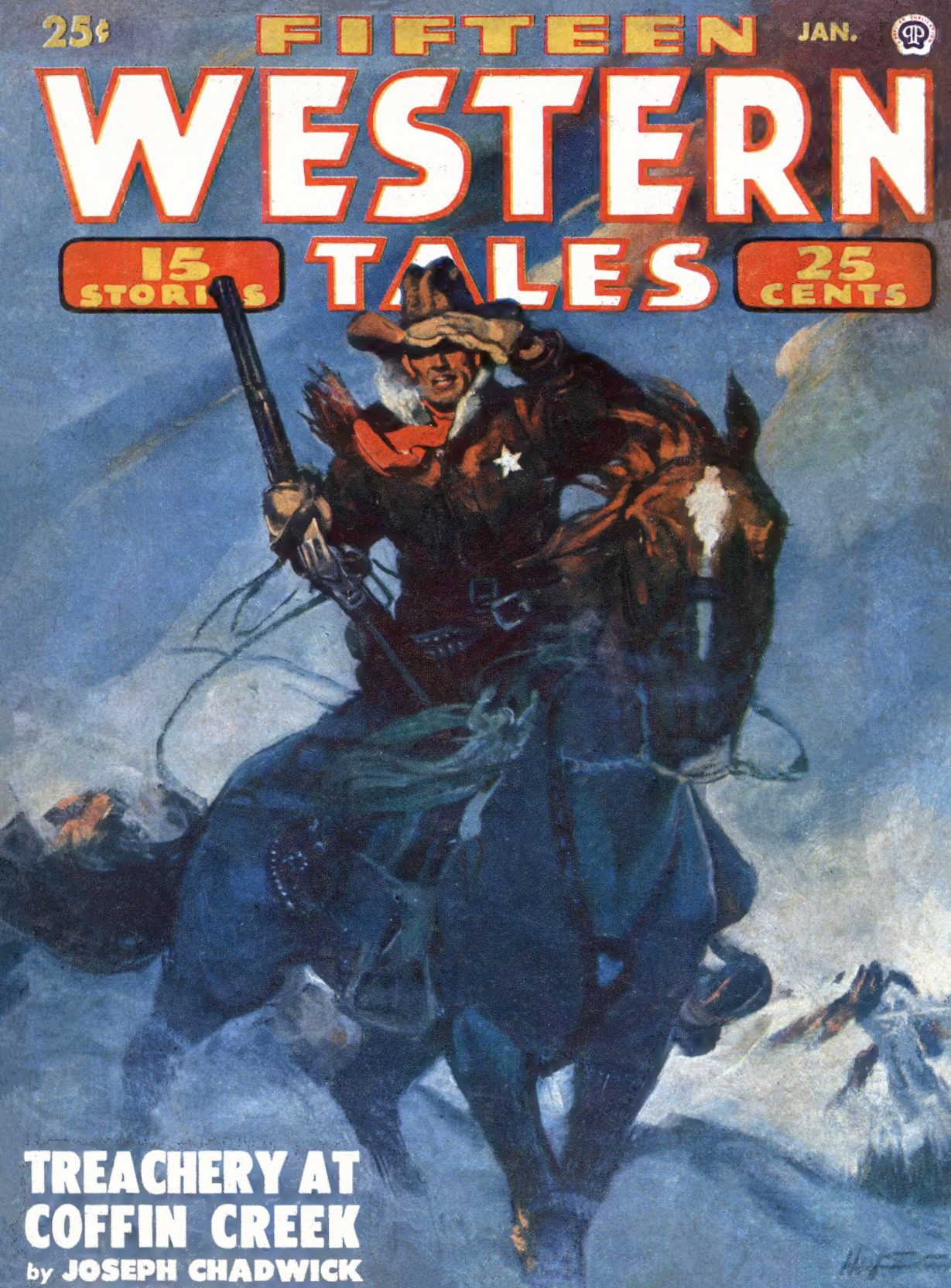

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SIXES FOR SATAN

HOWDY, friends. Next issue, we're going to have a real rip-snortin' tale of the wagon trails. When King Flanagan, his henchman Bloody, and the rest of the brutal drovers tore into the peaceful cow town for a night of fun, they brought plenty of trouble with them. They also brought along the fourteen-year-old button they'd picked up along the trail. The boy went straight to the heart of Mrs. Waring, sturdy wife of a range lord. . . .

She saw the boy stop dead, quivering on the clapwalk below the man. He gave the wrong answer to Flanagan, or maybe—from fear—he gave none at all, for Flanagan's brutal face suddenly flamed with anger. He stooped and grabbed the boy up to his level by the neck, and shook him like a wet rag until the boy's face turned solid purple.

This was while standing on the edge of the stoop, shaming and cursing the boy before all the rough grinning drovers of the train.

Out of wind and profanity, Flanagan then tossed him like a stick of firewood into the street's fine-powdered dust.

The boy bounced and she heard the hollow expulsion and suck of tortured breath. He was too out of wind to cry; he was almost wild with inability to breathe and fear of Flanagan.

Mrs. Waring's gentle eyes suddenly splintered icy lights. Then she stooped and lifted her skirts to the knee. The smirking drovers started a wild whoop that broke suddenly in mid-note as they stared at the woman who crossed directly toward Flanagan, holding a derringer .44.

She mounted the steps and stopped a careful five feet from him, and this precaution tautened the wild grin on his face. If she knew that much, she likely knew how to use that piece of snub-nosed artillery, and there was a feel to her that she would use it if she had to.

"Why you aren't a man—you aren't even fit to be called a brute pig!" she told him scathingly. "Punishing a little boy like that for wanting to see the town!"

His eyes hardened and his breath came at her, already strong and sour with red whiskey. "Ma'am," he warned, but without courtesy, "you'd best keep to your own side of the street or get treated the way you should be for coming over among my hungry bullies!"

"The first hungry bully who makes a move my way had best be hungry for a forty-four slug right in the head!" she answered. "I'll keep nowhere I don't feel like—but you will! You and your filthy lot of two-legged beasts are taking your stench from this town pronto!"

"Now jist a minute," Flanagan bit out harshly. "Not even a woman talks that way to the King!"

"This one does," she said flintily, and from the corner of her eye saw Bloody moving behind her stealthily. Her hand turned sidewise and lashed up and back, and her derringer was back beaded upon Flanagan before the black-bearded giant could clutch dazedly for his temple, before staggering from the stoop and crashing through the clapwalk.

Flanagan licked suddenly dry lips and his eyes tightened with wary cunning. A man was riding in hell-for-leather, meaning some trouble, and the woman's actions had shamed the townsmen into action, and they were converging out of doors and shadows, grim of eye and stiff and truculent of movement, and needing only a spark now to touch them off.

This was a wholesale lot of trouble he had not bargained for and did not know that he wanted, but he was still King Flanagan, and it was not in him to back down before God or man, and no more would he back down before a woman.

"If you aren't started," she told him, "by my count of ten, I'm shooting!"

He grunted, "She ain't kidding, boys, and that shot of hers really starts the fireworks. Get ready . . ."

Mrs. Waring wasn't kidding, and King Flanagan's drovers were ready. But so were the townsfolk. T. C. McClary's story, "Scourge of the Wagon Trails," will be in the next issue.

THE EDITOR

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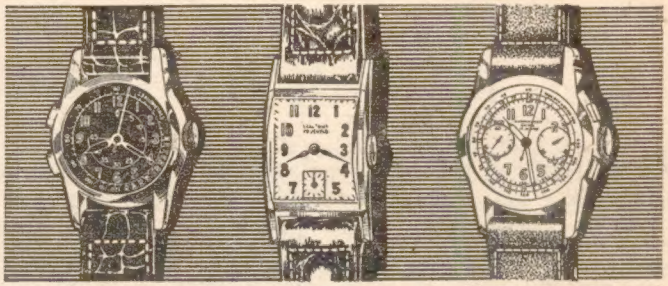

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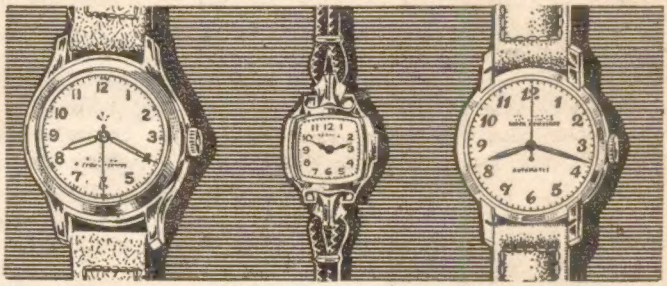

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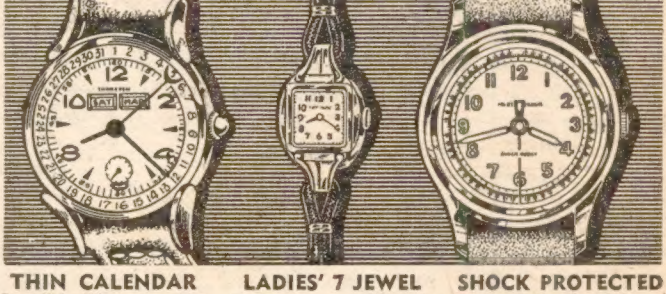

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GUN CURE

The law said old Doc Crofut couldn't practice any more, but Doc figured he could still hand out a dose of lead!

By BART CASSIDY

THE DAY that old Doc Crofut got a legal paper from the State capitol telling him he couldn't practice any more unless he'd been to medical school, he felt as if a mule's hoof had kicked him.

There wasn't any use in bucking the law; Doc had always been a man of peace, a healer. And then he remembered that young Eastern whippersnapper, Squires, who had hung out his medico's shingle last week.

Later, in young Doctor Squires' office, he offered some free advice.

"You might find these cow-folks sort of set in their ways, Squires. Ol' Matt Haworth, he says—"

But the young doctor, on his dignity, cut him off short.

That night Ed Joselyn drew up in his buggy. "Doc—yeah, the missus is all right. But I found a young feller shot up. Looks to me like he's one of the bunch that stuck up the Leland stage yesterday!"

Sleep-befuddled, Doc Crofut forgot that he was forbidden to practice his calling. He hauled on his pants, helped carry the youngster inside.

The next night there came a demanding knock on the door. For an instant Doc Crofut stood there, his old eyes puzzled, then nervous, and finally cold and hard. The kid's clothes and gun were in the closet. Softly he stepped to the door, opened it.

Three men stood there, each heavily armed. "I'm Sheriff Bradley from the county seat," one of them said. "You got a gun-shot kid wanted by the law in here, Doc. We'll take care of his case right now."

The gun in Doc's fat hand came up. "He's my patient—mebbe the last one I'll ever have, mister. You, the law, or hell itself can't take him away from me till he's cured!"

One of the men cursed, went for his gun. Doc Crofut beat him to the shot. Then hell broke loose there on the steps. Red gunflame split the night. . . . And at last Doc Crofut staggered into the office.

Later, a crowd pressed inside. His friends, his neighbors and patients; the thin, white-faced Doctor Squires, and young Sheriff Bill Bradley. . . .

"I knowed they was outlaws," Doc Crofut said, "an' guessed that they wanted to kill the kid before he told too much. But they was a mite late. I'll be responsible for him till you take him to jail, an' all the others need is a burial."

Young Doctor Squires stepped forward. "If you'd consider working with me. . . . I don't feel quite as competent as I did, Doctor. Nominally, you could be my—uh—laboratory assistant. But of course things could be arranged so that your good offices would not be curtailed. Meanwhile, if you'd let me, I could coach you—"

Doc Crofut grinned. "No hard feelin's, son. We might make a team, at that. If any of the folks here get a disease with a long Latin name, you could do the doctorin'. I'll jest stick to the things I know." He turned to the sheriff. "Bill, that outlaw would sure be surprised if he knowed I helped you to get borned, wouldn't he, now?" ✪ ✪ ✪

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By
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Saga of Bushwhack Sixes

They needed a hand at the DUN spread, they'd told Tom Wyatt, but what the Coffin Creek ranchers really wanted was a bullet-riddled corpse—and Wyatt seemed as good a choice as any.

CHAPTER ONE

Run, Wyatt—Run!

CATTLE prices were down, almost to rock bottom, and a lot of cattlemen who'd been wealthy, by their tally books, were now bellyaching that they were ruined. A lot more ranchhands were riding grubline, and if a rider—like Tom Wyatt, for example—heard even a rumor of a job, he lost no time in running it down.

Tom Wyatt said, "How do I find this DUN Ranch, friend?"

He was perched on a stool in a grubby restaurant in a cowtown called San Marcos. He'd finished his supper, and his last half-dollar lay beside his empty plate and coffee cup. The fat counterman, who looked worried, about business, maybe, came and took the half-dollar, dropping it into the till. A driving rain was beating against the restaurant window, giving it a needed washing. It was a bad night out, and Tom Wyatt, rolling a cigarette, wondered if he could find shelter for his horse and a place to bed himself down.

Except for the man who'd told him about this DUN outfit, which was maybe hiring riders, Wyatt was the only customer. The man was a townsman, but friendly toward

COFFIN CREEK

The second shot came . . . ripping through the skirt of his slicker.

jobless cowhands. He sat two stools away, eating a big steak. He was well-dressed, and he had the air of a man with money in his pocket. He was a little older than Wyatt, in his middle thirties, stockily-built and darkly handsome.

He said, "You can reach the DUN by taking the south road. Or by taking the Coffin Creek trail. The last route will save you about five miles. And on a night like this . . . ."

The man smiled, showing strong white teeth.

A man couldn't help liking him. Tom Wyatt liked him.

Wyatt said, "You think I should go out

there and ask about that job tonight?"

The man shrugged. "Up to you," he said. "But if I were after a job, I wouldn't waste any time. In the morning, there's apt to be a dozen riders showing up for jobs at DUN."

That was reasonable, and Wyatt nodded. He lighted his cigarette, and asked, "Mind telling me how to find this Coffin Creek trail? I'm a stranger in these parts."

He listened intently as the townsman gave him directions, then said, "Obliged to you," and got down from his stool.

The man said, "Luck," and smiled again.

Wyatt crossed to the door, took his slicker from the clothes-tree. He was pulling the slicker on when the door opened and a man ducked in out of the rain. He was a swarthy man of medium height, clean-shaven, about forty years old, a Mexican. He removed his hat, shook the water from it, hung it up. He said, "A nice night for ducks, Mr. Munson," looking at the man having supper at the counter.

"That's right, Morales," Mr. Munson said, looking around and smiling.

Morales too was wearing a slicker tonight. When he peeled it off, Tom Wyatt saw a law badge pinned to his shirt. It was a deputy sheriff's star. Morales hung his slicker on the tree, giving Wyatt a brief but interested once-over, and Wyatt knew that the lawman was seeing if his face—a lean, bronzed, passably good-looking face—fitted any of the pictures or descriptions on the man-wanted dodgers in the local sheriff's office. Evidently it didn't.

"Passing through?"

"Yeah."

"Bad night for traveling."

"Bad enough," said Wyatt, opening the door.

As he stepped out into the downpour, it occurred to him that there was a sharp one. He wouldn't want Deputy Sheriff Morales man-hunting him.

His horse was where he'd left it, under the wooden awning of the nearby feed store. Wyatt mounted and rode out, leaving little San Marcos behind, following Mr. Munson's directions in an attempt to locate the Coffin Creek trail.

THE rain sluiced down, the wind swept it along in dousing sheets. The night was inky black. Tom Wyatt rode slowly, making sure of his direction and seeking out the landmarks he'd been told to observe. He was cold and wet. The rain splashed into his face, trickled under the collar of his slicker. His levis were soaked from the knees down, and he felt wetness inside his boots. His horse, a blue roan gelding, looked as miserable as Tom Wyatt felt.

After an hour of riding, Wyatt located the cut in the low rock hills southwest of the town. It was a narrow rock-walled pass, tunnel-like, not wide enough to take a wagon. It was perhaps a quarter-mile long, and the trail through it was so hard-packed by hoofs that it hadn't turned to mud. Emerging from the pass, Wyatt now had only to keep to the trail. According to his directions, there was about three miles of hilly country to travel and then he would come upon Coffin Creek. There was a bridge across the Coffin, a DUN line cabin on the south side, and DUN range beyond.

By day, with no rain, it wouldn't have been much of a ride. But Wyatt was traveling strange country, and he took it slow and easy. He didn't want to wander off the trail, and maybe not be able to find it again until daylight.

It twisted and climbed, sloped away and twisted some more.

Finally, after two hours more of riding, Wyatt saw just ahead a stream brimful of flood water and a narrow wooden bridge spanning it. As he approached the bridge, he saw the dark shape of the line cabin beyond. It was just as the amiable Mr. Munson had described.

It was a wild and lonely spot, dismal now because of the drumming rain. There was a tangle of rocks and brush and scrub trees all around. The cabin seemed unoccupied; it was dark, no smoke came from its stone chimney, and the pole corral at the rear was empty. So Tom Wyatt was taken by surprise when the man with the gun in his hand appeared.

He was startled when the man yelled savagely, "I warned you, you no-good! Now grab for your gun!"

His gun swung up, leveled at Wyatt.

Tom Wyatt's reaction was unthinking, automatic. His own sixgun was beneath his slicker, hard to get at, so he jerked his Windchester from its saddle boot. The man's revolver spurted powder-flame, and

Wyatt heard the shriek of the slug, close by his head, the same instant the .45's roar reached him. The second shot came at once, ripping through the skirt of his slicker. It had missed his thigh only because his horse, spooked by the shooting, was bucking. Wyatt fired in a sort of panic, wild with fear that a third shot from across the bridge would cut him down. The rifle's flash blinded him momentarily. Then, getting his mount under control, he saw the man over there slowly collapsing to the ground.

Then another gun, a rifle, opened up behind him.

Wyatt swore under his breath, kicked spurs to his horse, and plunged into the brush and trees to the left of the trail. The rifle behind him cracked again, and he heard the slug ripping through the foliage. When the next shot came, Wyatt was well covered and almost out of range.

And he kept on going.

He splashed across the Coffin, gained the DUN side, and loped across DUN range. Finally he reined in to let the roan blow, and to listen. He heard no sounds of pursuit. There was only the drumming of the rain.

But Tom Wyatt was still scared.

He would have admitted that to anyone.

He waited there in the rain, thinking about it, gripped by indecision. He had ridden into a gun-trap, one set for somebody else, and he'd downed—killed, or at least wounded—one of the ambushers. They'd mistaken him for some other rider who was expected to come along that lonely trail tonight. He'd been lucky to escape with his life, but that narrow escape wasn't bothering him now. He wondered if he should go on to DUN headquarters, or high-tail it for other parts.

He didn't want to get mixed up in whatever was happening. A voice in his mind urged, *Run, Wyatt—Run!* He was already involved, through no fault of his own.

It might be best to clear out, making sure of avoiding trouble. But that would leave him still without a job, and tomorrow he would be hungry again. He could risk staying. The chances were that the ambushers still didn't know that they'd made a mistake, that they'd shot at the wrong man, and so, if he were careful, they wouldn't connect him with the one of them getting shot down. He could claim, if the need arose, that he'd come onto DUN range by the wagon road. If that Mr. Munson appeared to reveal that he'd told him, Wyatt, about the Coffin Creek trail, it could be met with a flat statement that it had been impossible to locate the pass in the hills.

It seemed all right.

Wyatt straightened it out in his mind, decided to pretend that he knew nothing of what had happened at Coffin Creek, and rode on south.

After several miles of flat country, he topped a low rise and saw a light ahead. It grew brighter, larger, and soon he identified it as a lamplighted window. He saw other lights now, apart from the first and not quite so bright. They turned out to be the windows of a bunkhouse. The brighter lamp glowed within the ranchhouse, a large stone-and-log building located well away from the regular ranch buildings.

He'd arrived at DUN headquarters.

A dog started a noisy barking over at the barn.

The ranchhouse door opened, and a feminine voice called, "Dad!"

The bunkhouse door swung open, and a sour masculine voice growled, "That you, boss? Where in blazes you been riding on a night like this?"

The ranchhouse was farther away. The woman was merely a silhouette in the lamplighted doorway. Wyatt swung over to the bunkhouse, and the man there, a gaunt-bodied and gray-haired man, saw that he was a stranger.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

"Wyatt's the name. I want to see the owner of this spread."

"He ain't here. He rode off somewhere. What do you want to see Matt Dunstan about? Might as well tell me. I'm Pete Shannon, his foreman, and I can say 'no' for him."

Tom Wyatt's hope faded.

It seemed as though he was being turned down before he even asked for a riding job with DUN.

HE DIDN'T dismount. Wyatt spoke from the saddle, giving his name and the reason for his visit, and considering the shooting at Coffin Creek and the sourness of this man, he expected to be told to clear out.

Water dripped steadily from his hat brim. Pete Shannon looked him over, eying too his mount. The DUN ramrod looked as though he couldn't make up his mind.

"You come through San Marcos?" he asked.

"Yeah. Had supper there."

"Which way did you come to DUN?"

"Along the wagon road," Wyatt replied, and was glad that he'd prepared himself for such a question.

Pete Shannon rubbed a bristly chin, still looking undecided. Then Wyatt heard running footsteps. The woman he'd seen at the ranchhouse door appeared beside him. She had pulled on a coat, and tied a scarf about her head. She was young. "What is it, Pete?" she asked in an anxious voice. Her eyes were worried.

"This stranger's looking for a job, Jodie."

"Hire him."

"Well, I don't know."

"It'll be all right. You can tell Dad I say you should hire him." Shannon still looked doubtful. But he said, "Wyatt, put your horse up in the barn. There's a bunk here for you, for the time being."

Wyatt looked at the girl standing there in the rain, worrying, and said, "Thanks, Miss." He started turning his horse away, but halted when she said, "Which way did you come in, mister?"

"Along the road from San Marcos."

"Oh."

"Jodie," said Pete Shannon, "I'll saddle up and ride out the back trail."

The girl shook her head, and said emphatically, "No. No, I won't have it. If there's anything Dad hates, it's somebody meddling in his business. We'll just—just wait."

Wyatt turned away, then, toward the barn. He got down and opened the door, led his horse inside. He thought over what he'd heard as he off-saddled and rubbed the roan down, wondering if the girl's father, DUN's owner, Matt Dunstan, had been one of the ambushers there at Coffin Creek—or if the ambush had been set for him. More and more, he was glad that he'd decided to say that he'd come to DUN by the wagon road. It was a story he meant to stick to, no matter what happened.

He removed his war-sack from the saddle cantle, took it with him to the bunkhouse. The girl, Jodie, had returned to the ranchhouse. Pete Shannon, when Wyatt opened the door and stepped inside, was sitting at the table with a mail order house catalogue in front of him. He was staring at the book, but Wyatt had an idea that the foreman wasn't seeing a thing.

There were a dozen bunks, but only four of them were occupied. DUN was a big spread, according to Mr. Munson, but it certainly kept a small crew. The four sleeping men didn't wake as Wyatt picked out one of the unoccupied bunks. Evidently, only Pete Shannon was worrying about the boss. Shannon said, low-voiced, "You claim to be a tophand, Wyatt?"

"I've worked for some big outfits, Pete."

"Name one."

"The 7D, over in Arizona."

"How long ago?"

"Up until a month ago."

"What doing?"

"Bronco busting, mostly."

"Yeah?" said Pete Shannon, skeptically. "Well, tomorrow, if it's done raining, you start fixing the corral fences. They've been needing a tophand repair job for a long time. You hungry?"

Wyatt said again that he'd had supper in San Marcos, and then, with Shannon silent, he got out of his wet clothes, hung them up, and turned in.

THE rain had let up sometime during the night, and the morning was crystal clear. Wyatt was introduced to the other DUN hands by the dour Pete Shannon. There was Mario, a wiry young Mexican; Len Macklin, a lanky man of about forty, with an angular face the color of saddle leather; Tex Larsen, a sandy-haired young fellow. The fourth man who had been asleep in the bunkhouse when Wyatt arrived was the cook, Mike Dolan. Wyatt got to know him at breakfast in the cookshack.

Shannon looked more worried than he had last night, and he said, as soon as the hands finished breakfast, "We're riding up toward Coffin Creek, boys. If the Coffin flooded from all that rain, some stock may have got caught in it."

Tom Wyatt knew then that Matt Dunstan hadn't come in, and this was Shannon's way of saying that he intended to search for his boss.

Shannon said, to him, "You, Arizona; you do some bronc-busting on that corral fence."

Wyatt went out with the others, located a small building that was equipped as a combination carpenter, harness-repair, and blacksmith shop. It looked as though it hadn't been used for a long time. Wyatt selected some tools, and went out to the corrals. They were pole traps, and they did need repairing. Some of the poles were broken, several posts leaned badly, and at least one gate needed mending. A stock of spare poles and posts stood against one side of the shop building.

Wyatt got to work when Shannon and the other three hands rode out. He was digging out a broken post when somebody came up behind him. He rested his shovel, looked around, and saw a girl watching him.

It wasn't the same girl he'd seen last night. This one was a bit older, maybe prettier. She was one of those rare women who could make even a gingham dress, which she was wearing, look like the height of fashion. Tom Wyatt guessed that she was beautiful. But at the same instant, he decided that he liked the other one, Jodie, better. He hadn't any reason for the decision. It was just a feeling. There was something wrong about this dark-haired girl—a haughtiness, a sulky expression, an angry look deep in her dark eyes.

"You're new," she said, and her voice was husky. "You came last night."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Which way did you come in?"

That question again. Wyatt thought that these people at DUN were sure making a liar of him. He said, I came by the wagon road, ma'am."

"Look," said the girl, lowering her voice—needlessly. "Look; you didn't bring a message for me, did you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, all right," she turned away disappointed, in the direction of the ranch-house.

Bewildered, Wyatt went back to work. About an hour later, Jodie appeared. She was wearing men's clothes. She had on levis and boots, a flannel shirt and a doeskin jacket. A flat-crowned gray Stetson hung at her shoulders by its chin-strap. Her hair was dark blonde, and her eyes were a clear gray. Her eyes weren't just worried this morning, they were scared. But she tried to hide her fear. She thrust her hands into her levis pockets and leaned, man-fashion, against the fence just beyond Wyatt.

He said, " 'Morning, Miss Dunstan."

"Call me 'Jodie.' Everybody does."

"Morning, Jodie."

The girl forced a smile. She said casually, "Where'd the boys head for?"

"Some place called Coffin Creek."

"Oh."

"To see if any stock got caught in the flood water."

Jodie was silent for a time, then said abruptly, "What did Carole ask you, Wyatt?"

"Why, I don't remember."

"You sure must have a poor memory."

"I have that."

"Or maybe you're just a gentleman?"

Wyatt looked around at her, grinning. "I've never been called a name like that before," he said. "Maybe I should get mad."

Jodie smiled again, more easily this time. She said, "I'm glad I told Pete to put you on, Wyatt. I kind of like you. I've a job here, too. I keep the ranch accounts. That gives me some say. I could get a man fired, the same way I got you hired. I might do it, too, if a man's memory didn't improve. What did my sister ask you?"

Wyatt kept busy on the fence. He was surprised that the two girls were sisters, for they weren't much alike in appearance. But he knew that he wasn't going to carry tales about one to the other. He said, after a time, "Nope, my memory fails me. Am I fired?"

Jodie said bitterly, "Dammit, why does every man have to turn gallant the first time he sees Carole?"

"I'd a bad memory about you too, Jodie, if need be."

"That need will never arise," the girl said evenly. "I have nothing to be secretive about. Nobody needs to hide anything for me." She studied him intently, as though trying to read his thoughts. "Did she try to play upon your sympathy?" she asked. "Did she tell you that we're practically keeping her a prisoner here? Did she want you to ride to town with a message for Steve Munson. Did she—"

"Munson?" Wyatt said.

"The man she's in love with. The man she's making a fool of herself over," Jodie said. "The reason why Dad locked her in her room last night!"

Wyatt didn't say anything.

He was wondering why Carole Dunstan's father and sister didn't want her to see Mr. Munson. The man seemed an all right sort.

Jodie said, angrily now, "All right, Wyatt, go ahead and side her. But don't make the mistake of ever helping her keep a rendezvous with any man. If you're caught at that, Matt Dunstan is sure to horsewhip you off the DUN!"

She turned away, heading for the house.

Mike Dolan called to her from the cookshack doorway, but Jodie didn't answer him. Tom Wyatt shrugged, and went back to his work

Matt Dunstan wasn't going to horsewhip Tom Wyatt for helping Carole with her love affair, if such help should be forthcoming. In fact, the boss of the DUN would never again raise a hand in anger against any man. Matt Dunstan was dead.

Len Macklin brought him in, packing his dead body on the rancher's big gray gelding. Macklin's long face was grave, his eyes were angry, and he said, low-voiced but savagely, "They got him. Those damn' squatters got him!"

Tom Wyatt and the cook, Mike Dolan, helped lift the heavy body from the gray and carry it into the house. They lay Matt Dunstan upon his bed, and Mike Dolan darkened the bedroom by drawing the window blinds.

Jodie was there, tears streaming down her face, but with no sound escaping her. Carole was there, too, dry-eyed but uttering whimpering sounds.

Grief filled the room.

The three men stood with their heads bared. Finally Dolan covered the dead man with a blanket, from boots to snow-thatched head.

Len Macklin said, in a hoarse whisper, "We're blaming those squatters, Jodie. Most likely it was Bart Hagarthy. Pete and Tex went after the no-good son. Mario rode to town for Sheriff Hodge."

Jodie nodded jerkily.

Len Macklin stood a minute longer, then turned to the door. Mike Dolan and Tom Wyatt followed him from the room and from the house. They halted upon the roofed veranda, and Dolan asked where they'd found Matt Dunstan.

Macklin said, "At the bridge over Coffin Creek. His gun was beside him, with two shots fired. He'd put up a fight, before a bullet finally got him in the heart."

Tom Wyatt tried to hide the fear gripping him.

He knew that it had been his bullet that found Matt Dunstan's heart.

CHAPTER TWO

Neck for the Noose

MARIO arrived with the sheriff before Pete Shannon and Tex Larsen showed up with the squatter, Hagarthy. Sheriff Pat Hodge came in a horse and buggy, and he'd brought along Dr. Harmon. The deputy sheriff, Morales, whom Tom Wyatt had seen in the San Marcos restaurant last night, came too—riding beside Mario.

There was a difference between the two lawmen, and Wyatt marked it at once. Hodge was big and fat and florid, the politician-type sheriff. Morales was dark and lean, the peace officer by nature and long training.

It was Morales who whispered to the fussy little physician, before they went into the house, "If the slug's still in the body, Doc, I'll want it."

Morales wasn't inside long, no longer perhaps than it took him to view the body and murmur a few words of consolation to the bereaved sisters. He came out walking unhurriedly, his dark eyes bright and eager, and he said, "Find anything beside the body, Macklin?"

Macklin, Dolan and Tom Wyatt were waiting by the bunkhouse.

Macklin said, "The rain last night wiped out all sign, Juan."

Deputy Sheriff Juan Morales nodded. He looked at Wyatt, remembering him. "Hello," he said. "How'd you get here?"

It was just a greeting, not requiring a reply, so Wyatt didn't say that he'd got there by following the wagon road. He was relieved that he didn't need to answer, for he had a feeling that this Juan Morales could spot a lie as quickly as he'd tell a lead half-dollar for a counterfeit.

Morales rolled a cigarette. He said, "Here comes Pete and Tex. Who's that they got with them? Bart Hagarthy?" He looked at Len Macklin. "Why?" he asked. "What's up?"

"We figure Hagarthy did it," Macklin said, his manner defiant. "He and some other

nester-ranchers are squatting on DUN's west range. The boss didn't bother them at first, but when things got bad—when the bottom dropped out of the cattle market—he sort of got a mad on. He ordered those squatters to clear out. They would've gone, but for Bart Hagarthy. Hagarthy thinks he's smart and tough. He told Matt to go to hell. They had a bad fall-out, just a couple days ago."

Wyatt had the feeling that Morales knew all that.

Shannon and Larsen rode in with Hagarthy between them. The squatter's holster was empty, so was his saddle scabbard. Tex Larsen was packing a spare six gun and rifle. The two DUN riders must have thrown down on Hagarthy, taking him by surprise, and then disarming him. He didn't look like a man who'd give up without a fight, if he had a chance to fight. He was burly, blond man about thirty, coarsely handsome. He was in an ugly temper. His heavy face was flushed a dull red, and his china-blue eyes glittered.

"Morales, talk some sense to these loco fools!" Hagarthy burst out. "They claim I bushwhacked Matt Dunstan! It's a lie!"

Morales puffed on his cigarette. "Take it easy, amigo," he said. "I talked to Dunstan the other day, after you and he had a fall-out. He said that you threatened him."

Hagarthy swore under his breath. He looked jolted. "All right," he said, warily now. "But it was only talk. I told Dunstan that if he tried to run me off my land with a court order, I'd meet him with a gun in my hand. I know his claim on the west range is shaky. It's part of an old Spanish land grant, and—" He broke off abruptly, staring at Tom Wyatt. "Who're you?"

"Wyatt's the name. I work here."

"Since when?"

"Since last night."

Hagarthy thought about that, scowling. Then he looked back at Morales. He was more reasonable now. "Look, Juan; I might have called Matt's bluff, but I wouldn't have crossed him the whole way. I've got a reason—"

"Sure. You're in love with his daughter."

"Dammit, do you have to tell everything you know?"

"All I know, amigo," said Morales, with a shrug, "is what everybody knows." He smiled. "All I learn is what people tell me."

Sheriff Hodge appeared at the ranchhouse door and motioned to his deputy. Morales started over to him, then said, "Come along, Hagarthy. You too, Pete."

They went into the house with the sheriff.

The DUN cowhands stood in a group, talking it over in low voices. Tom Wyatt went to the corral fence and started working again. It was best, he decided, not to appear too interested—since he was a stranger, and not known to be involved. But he was worried. If they arrested Bart Hagarthy for the murder, it would be up to him to confess that he himself had killed Matt Dunstan. He couldn't let an innocent man go to the gallows. But he didn't want to go there, either. Tom Wyatt was scared.

He wondered what was going on inside the house.

He wondered if it was Jodie that Hagarthy was in love with, and decided that, since Carole was in love with Steve Munson, it must be. Somehow, Tom Wyatt didn't like that. He'd taken a fancy to that pants-wearing Jodie, himself!

AFTER about an hour, the men came from the house. Sheriff Pat Hodge called Len Macklin over, relieved him of Hagarthy's rifle and sixgun, putting them into the buggy. The sheriff climbed into the rig, and Dr. Harmon squeezed in beside him. Deputy Sheriff Morales and Bart Hagarthy crossed the ranchyard and mounted their horses. The big handsome squatter moved like a sleepwalker, dazed by what was happening to him. Pete Shannon crossed toward the bunkhouse, walking like a tired old man.

Morales told Hagarthy to wait. The deputy rode over to the corrals, reined in, studied Tom Wyatt. He said slowly, "How come, amigo, you took the wagon road last night?"

"Couldn't locate the pass in those rock hills."

"That might be."

"Why?" Wyatt forced himself to ask. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I guess. It's just that Steve Munson told me that he directed you to the Coffin Creek trail, it being shorter than the road."

Morales waited, as though hoping Wyatt would say something more.

Then he shrugged, turned away. He and Hagarthy followed the sheriff's buggy.

Pete Shannon was talking to the other

DUN hands over by the bunkhouse. Curiosity drew Tom Wyatt, and the grizzled old foreman was saying,"Hagarthy claimed that he was home all night, from the time it started to rain. But he can't prove it. Doc Harmon dug the slug out of Matt. It was a 30-30, and Hagarthy had a 30-30 Winchester in his saddle boot when we picked him up. He claims he's as innocent as a new-born calf, but he's lying. He knows that that rain last night washed out the tracks he made when he Injunned up on the boss, there at Coffin Creek. He'll hang, sure."

Wyatt winced.

This was cow country justice. It didn't take much evidence to convict a man of a crime; motive and opportunity were enough. Matt Dunstan had been the country's biggest rancher, and it seemed that the devil himself hated a squatter. It wouldn't take a jury long to find Hagarthy guilty.

Shannon said, "The funeral'll be tomorrow," and then for a time there was a heavy silence.

Macklin finally asked, "What'll happen to the DUN, now that the boss is gone?"

"Matt left a will," Shannon said. "Jodie and Carole inherit everything. Matt told me that, not long ago. The girls can sell out, if they want, but I figure Jodie will hold on. She loves DUN, just like Matt did. I reckon we'll be working for Jodie Dunstan, from now on."

Not much more was said.

Tom Wyatt went back to work, and worried while he worked.

There must have been two hundred people at the funeral. Ranch folks and townspeople. They came in all sorts of rigs and by saddle mount, everybody dressed up in their Sunday clothes. The burial service was conducted by a clergyman from San Marcos, Reverend Eli Layman. The DUN had its own little graveyard, and Matt Dunstan was laid to rest beside his wife and close by some men who had died while in DUN's employ. It was a pleasant spot, for cottonwood trees had been planted about it and the grass was kept cut short.

Afterwards, the visitors stood about and talked quietly for a time. Then some departed. Some, from far off, were staying for a meal at the ranchhouse, to be served by the Mexican housekeeper. Jodie and Carole retired from sight as soon as the funeral was over. Steve Munson was there. He'd spoken a few words to Carole, just before she disappeared into the house.

Tom Wyatt heard a couple townsmen talking about Bart Hagarthy, one saying, "He hasn't a chance, but Steve Munson is to defend him."

It was the first Wyatt knew that Munson was a lawyer.

He looked for the man, found him about to start back to town. Munson had come in a horse and buggy. He was lighting a cigar, and his darkly handsome face was grave. He nodded, said in friendly fashion, "So you landed a job with DUN."

"Thanks to you, Mr. Munson."

"Something on your mind?" the lawyer asked, eying Wyatt curiously.

"No, sir," Wyatt said. "That is . . . Well, I heard somebody say that you're Bart Hagarthy's lawyer. I've been wondering if you think Hagarthy's got any chance of getting off."

"A good chance," Munson said, without hesitation. "I believe in the man's innocence. Otherwise, I wouldn't have taken the case. There's only circumstantial evidence against him, and that's pretty flimsy." He studied the burning end of his cigar. "By the way, Morales tells me that you didn't take the Coffin Creek trail the other night. That's fortunate, for you. You might have ridden right into that gunfight."

"Yeah," said Tom Wyatt.

He caught Munson's nod, watched the lawyer drive away, then turned and found Deputy Sheriff Morales watching him from the ranchhouse veranda. Morales's eyes had a dreamy look. He was half-smiling with lips that held a brown-paper cigarette.

THAT night, after everyone was gone, Jodie Dunstan asked the DUN crew to come to the house. The hands filed in, hats in hand, trying to keep their boot heels and spurs from making a racket. Both Jodie and her sister were in the room used for an office. Jodie sat at a desk, and Carole stood by a window. Both girls wore dark dresses. Both looked as though they had been crying a lot. Jodie's voice was husky.

"I just wanted to say," she told the man, "that things will go on the way they always did. Carole and I want you all to stay on, and—" she smiled faintly. . . . "we hope that none of you will dislike working for women."

She spoke a little more, saying that when

cattle prices rose again, DUN would hire more riders. She hoped that the present short-handed crew would not have to work too hard. She gave Pete Shannon orders to pick up a small herd that Matt Dunstan had bought down at High Rock. That was all of it. . . . That night, lying in his bunk, Tom Wyatt thought of Jodie Wyatt and wished that there was some way he could comfort her in her grief. It was odd, but he didn't have any such feeling toward her sister—yet Carole was by far the more attractive.

Morning early, Pete Shannon and the others saddled up and headed for High Rock. Wyatt was left to his fence-patching job, and at mid-morning Jodie came over and asked him to saddle a horse for her. "That paint," she said. Then added, "Saddle your roan, Tom. I'd like somebody to ride with me."

He was glad to get off the fence job, and lost no time in roping and saddling the horses. They mounted and rode out, side by side, and after a mile or two, Jodie said, "I want to go to where it happened, and look around. There won't be any sign, of course, because of that heavy rain, but maybe. . . . Oh, I don't know."

"You don't think that Bart Hagarthy—?"

"It's hard to believe. Bart doesn't seem like a killer," Jodie replied. "After we've stopped at Coffin Creek, I'm going to ride over to the west range and talk with those other squatters. Bart's neighbors."

Wyatt guessed that Jodie and Hagarthy were in love.

They didn't hurry, but they reached Coffin Creek all too soon for Tom Wyatt. He remained in the saddle and watched Jodie get down and look around. There wasn't anything for her to see. The spot was in a hollow, and the gushing rain-water from all around had even washed away some of the surface soil. The Coffin was low today. The rickety wooden bridge was only about fifty feet in length. Matt Dunstan had been on the south side of it, and he, Tom Wyatt, on the north side. . . . Suddenly Wyatt remembered something. There'd been another man beside Matt Dunstan, another man with a rifle. That one had been behind Wyatt, on one of the brush and rock covered slopes.

Hagarthy?

If it had been Hagarthy, and it couldn't have been anyone else, then he'd been there for no good reason. Maybe he'd been there

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to kill Matt Dunstan. And the thought of murder was little less ugly than the act. Tom Wyatt wondered if that didn't let him out of it. For, after all, his killing Matt Dunstan had been in self-defense.

Wyatt lifted his gaze to one of the little slopes north of the creek, and gave a violent start. There was a rider up there in the brush, watching him and the girl. Wyatt exclaimed, "Jodie—"

The girl saw the direction of his startled gaze.

She looked up. "It's Juan Morales," she said, after a moment.

The deputy, now that he was seen, came riding down to them. He crossed the bridge, touched his hat to Jodie, gave Wyatt a nod, and said, "There's nothing to see—except this." He held up an empty rifle cartridge. "A 30-30 shell. Half the riders in these parts use them."

"Juan, you don't believe that Bart . . ."

"I'm just making sure, Jodie," Morales replied. "Will you tell me something? What was your father doing here that night?"

"I—I don't know."

"You mean, you won't tell."

"Juan, please!"

"It's all right, Jodie," Morales said. "I don't gossip." He looked at Wyatt. "Ride off a little way, will you, amigo?"

Wyatt would have obeyed, but Jodie said, "No, Tom, stay. I know that you don't gossip. I found that out the first time I talked with you." She turned to Morales again, drew a sharp breath, and went on, "Carole hasn't changed. Ever since she was a kid, it's been one man or another. I guess she—she's too beautiful. Lately she was riding out at night, to meet some man. She was about to go out the other night, but Dad locked her in her room. He rode out. He knew that Carole and her men met here. This was their rendezvous. So I guess that's why he came here."

"I heard that Hagarthy and Carole were seeing each other," Morales said. "I think that maybe that was one reason why Matt wanted to run Hagarthy out of the country."

Jodie shook her head. "She'd broke off with Bart."

"Because Matt wanted her to?"

"No. Of her own accord. I think Dad would have approved of Bart, if Bart would have come and asked for her hand. Bart would have, I suppose. But Carole didn't want to marry Bart Hagarthy, I guess."

"Who was the new man, Jodie?"

"I'm not sure."

"But you have an idea?"

"Maybe," said Jodie. "But I'm not going to tell without being sure. It's someone I don't believe would come with a rifle, to a rendezvous with a girl. If I had to pick one of them as Dad's murderer, I'd be forced to pick Bart Hagarthy."

Morales nodded gravely. "I have a lot of respect for your judgment, Jodie," he said. "But I have to remember that it's not good to hang an innocent man." He lifted his reins, turned his horse toward the bridge. He halted, looked at Wyatt. "When you came down the wagon road that night, amigo, was the bridge over Sarbo Creek still there—or was it already washed away?"

"It must've been there," Wyatt said. "I didn't even notice a bridge."

"So?" said Morales, and rode on.

Wyatt saw Jodie gazing after the lawman in bewilderment. "That's queer," she said. "There is no bridge anywhere along the Sarbo."

Wyatt gave a start.

It wasn't queer. Morales had baited him. Morales wasn't sure that Tom Wyatt had come to DUN by the wagon road.

CHAPTER THREE

The Escape

THEY rode west, Tom Wyatt and the girl, crossing a low rocky ridge that, extending a half dozen miles to the south, cut DUN range in two. The west range was smaller, poorer, without an adequate water supply during part of the year. Matt Dunstan had seldom run cattle west of the ridge, and for that reason, the squatters—a half dozen or so nester ranchers—had come there.

Bart Hagarthy had a few hundred head of cattle out on the bunch grass, and four horses in a fenced meadow. He had a one-room cabin and a small barn. It was a tidy enough place. Hagarthy, a former ranchhand, was just a man who wanted to be his own boss. He had started small, but, with luck, he might have one day gained a measure of security for himself. But he'd made the almost fatal mistake of squatting on range owned by another man.

Reining in before the tiny cabin, Jodie said, "Dad wasn't himself of late. He lost a lot of money when the bottom dropped out of the cattle market, and he was almost crazy from worry over Carole. Ordinarily, he would have merely asked Bart to buy the range he wanted—at a fair price." She pointed to the west. "That's Milt Glennon's ranch," she said. We'll ride over. Maybe Milt knows if Bart was home that night."

It was about two miles to Glennon's place. Milt Glennon, a lanky man of about fifty, was cagey. "Morales was here," he said. It was evident that he was afraid of the law. "I told him that I don't know what Hagarthy was doing the night Matt Dunstan was killed. Maybe he was home, like he claims. I don't know."

There was nothing to be learned from such a man, and Hagarthy's next nearest neighbor was three miles farther away. "The Naylor family," Jodie told Wyatt, as they rode away. "Not very nice people. I doubt if they'd tell us anything, if they could."

"Morales probably talked with these people," Wyatt said.

"I guess so."

"He's a shrewd one, that deputy. Maybe he'll clear Hagarthy, before he's done snooping around."

"If only Dad hadn't gone to Coffin Creek that night," Jodie said, and suddenly she was crying. She reined in, got down off her paint cow pony, folded her arms against the saddle, and buried her face in her arms. She cried from deep inside her, her entire body heaving with her sobs. Once she said, "Don't look at me, Tom. Just go on, and don't look at me."

Her suffering made Wyatt wince.

But he didn't leave her, and he didn't stop looking at her. Her hat hung at her shoulders. Her tawny hair glinted softly, like old gold. He got off his horse, stepped over, put his arm about her waist. Suddenly Jodie turned and pressed her tear-stained face against his shoulder. After a long time, she was cried out. She lifted her head, wiped tears away with the back of her hand, like a little girl. She didn't pull away, though she certainly realized that Tom Wyatt, who was all but a stranger, held her in his arms.

I didn't want to break down," she said. "I won't again. It's just that I feel so all alone, with Dad gone and Carole a person I can't understand. Friends and neighbors

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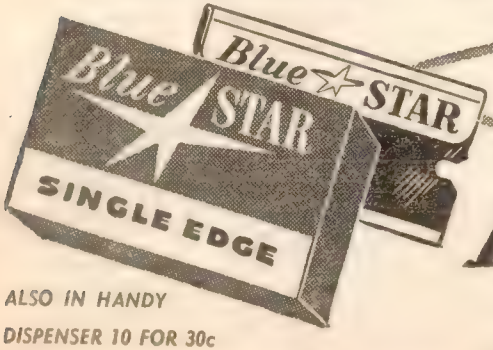

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and a person's ranchhands are a help. But if there was only someone close to me, somebody who cared about me. . . ."

"Won't I do, Jodie?"

"Why should you care, Tom? You hardly know me."

"I liked you the first time I talked to you."

"I'm not beautiful like Carole."

"To me you are. A lot more beautiful, Jodie."

She lifted her head, startled, and said, "You mean that, don't you? All the other men went loco over Carole and couldn't see me for looking. But you—you mean it. Tell me again, Tom. Tell me you think I'm beautiful."

A cowhand was never much for fancy words, but they came easily now for Tom Wyatt. He was whispering things to Jodie Dunstan that he'd never dreamed of saying to another girl, and then, all at once, he was holding her tight, and she was clinging to him, and he was kissing her upon the mouth. And Jodie was saying, "Do you know why I liked you from the start Tom? Because you're like Matt Dunstan must have been as a young man, and I also loved him so much."

She lifted her face for him again.

And there he was, Tom Wyatt realized with a horrible sense of guilt, kissing the daughter of the man he had killed.

HE WORRIED about it. Even at night, he'd wake up and start worrying about it. He knew that it wasn't fair to Jodie. His feeling of guilt grew, and sometimes Tom Wyatt wanted to saddle his roan and ride out—ride as far from DUN as it was possible to go. He also had Bart Hagarthy on his conscience, even though he kept telling himself that the squatter must have been in the brush that rainy night—and that only his chance coming along that trail had kept Hagarthy from killing Matt Dunstan. Something else began to worry him. If Hagarthy was forced to admit that he'd been at Coffin Creek, he would certainly reveal that there had been a third man present—and that the third man had killed Dunstan. Certainly, Hagarthy had kept quiet this long only because he could not identify that third man.

Wyatt not only didn't sleep well, he lost his appetite. He grew edgy, jumpy, and he found no pleasure in the company of the other DUN hands. He was grateful when Pete Shannon, after the corrals were in good shape, put him to repairing drift fence. A cowhand didn't like digging post holes and stringing barbwire, but Wyatt was working alone—and for that reason, he was glad for the unpleasant chore.

He didn't see Jodie during the next few days, except when she appeared on the ranchhouse veranda. Thinking herself in love didn't cause Jodie to forget that she was in mourning. She and Carole did not go far from the house.

Saturday afternoon came finally, and the cowhands slicked up to go to town. Pete Shannon, Len Macklin, Mario, and Mike Dolan left for San Marcos early, but Tex Larsen hung around a while. When the sandy-haired young puncher was ready to leave, he looked into the bunkhouse and saw Tom Wyatt lying on his bunk and staring into space.

"Better come along," Tex said grinning. "A night in town'll be good for what's ailing you, bucko."

Wyatt decided then to go. It would give him a chance to find out if Bart Hagarthy was to be brought to trial.

He saddled his horse, rode with Tex Larsen, and when they reached town, Tex said, "I'll see you later. I've got a chore to do." He winked at Wyatt, slyly. "Got to deliver a message to Steve Munson, for Carole."

He swung over to a false-fronted building housing a hardware store.

The lawyer's office was on the second floor, and an open flight of steps at the side of the building led to Munson's door.

Wyatt decided that he'd call on Steve Munson later.

San Marcos was just a little town, but it was plenty busy on a Saturday afternoon and evening. People were in from all the ranches, come to have themselves a time shopping and gossiping. Tom Wyatt sat on the porch of the Trail Saloon, smoking a cigarette, not caring to drink or to join the noisy crowd inside, and he'd never felt so lonely in his life.

The courthouse, a two-storied brick building, was farther along the street. The county jail, a squat adobe building, stood behind it. Deputy Sheriff Morales came from the courthouse, from the sheriff's office in that building, and angled across the street toward the Trail Saloon.

He halted before Wyatt. He smiled, but

somehow his eyes held no friendliness. He said, "Hagarthy's been charged with murder, Wyatt. His trial will be held next month. Judge Carter will be on the bench, and he and Matt Dunstan were friends. The jury will be DUN's neighbors, men who have no liking for squatters. Hagarthy will hang, sure. And he'll hang on pretty thin evidence, too. I think that maybe he's guilty, but I don't feel sure. How do you feel about it, amigo?"

"I'm no lawman, Morales. I'm just a forty-a-month cowhand."

"And bronco-buster, Pete Shannon tells me."

"That's right."

"You ever done any mustanging, Wyatt?"

"Some. A couple years ago. Over in Arizona, at Black Basin."

Morales looked interested but not surprised. He said, "Wild-horse hunting makes a good tracker. It's funny that an old mustanger couldn't locate a pass in the hills when he was given directions, even though it was a rainy night. Eh, amigo?"

He smiled again, still thinly, and went into the saloon.

The sun was almost down and it was still warm, but Tom Wyatt shivered. He told himself, *Morales knows.* The deputy was sure that Tom Wyatt had traveled the Coffin Creek trail that night, and he was convinced, because Wyatt denied it, that the cowhand had witnessed all or a part of what happened by the creek. Morales couldn't prove what he suspected, but he was trying his best to trick Wyatt into admitting he'd followed the trail instead of the wagon road to DUN.

The sun was gone, dusk thickened, a light came on in Munson's law office. Wyatt rose, crossed the street, climbed the plank steps, knocked on the lawyer's door. Munson called heartily, "Come in, come in!"

He was seated at a rolltop desk, and he'd been writing a letter. He rose and shook hands, then pointed to a chair. Wyatt seated himself, looked around. There were shelves lined with law books. Munson offered his visitor a cigar, lighted it himself when Wyatt said, "No, thanks. I'll have a cigarette." As Wyatt rolled his smoke, the lawyer asked, "Something on your mind?" He smiled in his friendly way. I'm always on the lookout for a new client."

"It's Hagarthy," Wyatt said. "You still think you will be able to get him off?"

Munson's smile faded. He frowned. "I don't like to discuss it, Tom," he said. "Not with someone not concerned in the matter. But—well, you and I are friends. Confidentially, I'm worried. I was sure that Hagarthy was not guilty. But I've changed my mind. I'm not withdrawing from the case, but I feel that Hagarthy's only chance is to admit that he killed Dunstan in a gunfight. After all, Dunstan had fired two shots—so it wasn't a one-sided affair."

"Morales thinks Hagarthy will hang."

"Morales can be wrong. I'm hoping for a prison sentence."

Wyatt lighted his cigarette. His hand holding the match shook unduly. Munson saw that, and asked, "What's bothering you, Tom?"

"Morales."

"Why?"

"He thinks I traveled Coffin Creek trail that night," Wyatt said. "I keep telling him that I didn't, but he won't take my word for it."

Munson's frown deepened. He studied the burning end of his cigar. After a long silence, he said, "I guess Morales is just trying to find the one thing that would clinch the case against Hagarthy—a witness."

Wyatt shook his head. "That deputy has an idea Hagarthy didn't do it. He knows why Matt Dunstan was at Coffin Creek that night. He guessed that Carole Dunstan was to meet a man there, and that Matt found out and kept her at home—and went himself." Wyatt paused, suddenly realizing that he was taking a lot for granted when he talked of what Juan Morales suspected. But he went on, "He tried to get Jodie—and maybe Carole too, I don't know—to say who Dunstan expected to see turn up at Coffin Creek. He didn't find out, because Jodie thinks that the man wouldn't have come with a rifle."

Munson said chokingly, "Jodie knows that Carole and I . . ."

"Her father found out somehow. Jodie must have heard Dunstan and Carole quarreling about it. I learned about it from Jodie."

"It wasn't I," Munson said thickly. "I received a note from Carole early that evening, telling me not to come to Coffin Creek. Tex Larsen brought the note." He looked appealingly at Tom Wyatt. "As my friend,

Tom, you'll not talk of this? We've got to consider Carole's reputation. You—"

"I haven't talked, and I won't talk," Wyatt broke in. "But I sure wish that Morales would stop hounding me. I wish too that I knew Bart Hagarthy was at Coffin Creek that night, and meant to kill Dunstan."

Munson nodded.

"I'll have another talk with Hagarthy," he said. "And try to get him to make a statement."

FEELING a little easier in his mind, now that he knew that even Steve Munson believed that Bart Hagarthy had been at Coffin Creek that night, Tom Wyatt went to supper. He went to the counter restaurant he'd visited on his first night in San Marcos. He had a couple dollars in his pocket, borrowed from Pete Shannon until payday. He took his time eating, then drifted over to the Trail Saloon and found Mario and Len Macklin at the bar. He had a drink with them, then drifted to the rear of the long room where Pete Shannon was sitting in a poker game. The Trail was crowded with ranchers and their cowhands. There was a lot of talk about Bart Hagarthy, but no argument at all about his guilt.

Juan Morales was there. He too was watching the poker game, and when an excited townsman burst in through the swing doors, it was to shout for the deputy. The townsman yelled wildly, "Juan, Hagarthy escaped!"

Morales started toward the door in an abrupt quiet. The townsman said, still in that excited voice, "He busted out when Sheriff Hodge took him his supper. He hit Pat over the head with a sixgun. Somebody —maybe one of his squatter friends—must've slipped it to him through the bars of his cell window. He's gone!"

"All right, all right," Morales said, and went out.

"That sure proves him guilty," a rancher growled. "Boys, let's help round up that no-good."

There was a rush of men toward the doors, and all in a minute the saloon was cleared except for Tom Wyatt and the bartenders.

Wyatt went out onto the saloon porch, and saw people running from every direction toward the courthouse and the jail behind it. There was a babel of voices, all merging finally into the solid voice of an angry mob. Soon the street was deserted except for around the courthouse. Even the bartenders and the clerks from the stores were drawn to the scene. Tom Wyatt stood alone.

He was still alone when he saw a shadowy figure in the dark alley-way between two buildings directly across the street. He thought, with quick alarm, *Hagarthy!* He was still thinking that it was the escaped prisoner when the gun blazed.

There were three fast shots.

The third found Tom Wyatt.

He crumpled to the floor of the Trail Saloon porch.

A .45 slug could knock the heftiest of men over, if it caught solidly. But Tom Wyatt was merely staggered when the bullet tore through the flesh over his left ribs, and he deliberately let himself fall in the hope of spoiling the gunman's aim if he fired again. As he sprawled on the saloon porch, Wyatt drew his own gun—and blasted two shots into the inky darkness of the alleyway.

He was shooting blindly.

In the brief moment it had taken him to drop flat, his would-be killer had vanished—no doubt fleeing back through the alleyway.

People came running, and by the time Wyatt picked himself up, an excited crowd surrounded him. It was seen that he was wounded. Shouts rose for Doc Harmon. When the doctor came, he said, "Help him up to my office, some of you."

Once in the office, the fussy little physician chased the others away. He had Wyatt strip to the waist, lay upon a table, beneath a bright lamp. He halted the flow of blood, examined the torn flesh, decided that a rib or two may have been nicked but none was broken. He cleansed the wound with carbolic solution, and was bandaging it heavily when Juan Morales entered.

The deputy didn't smile. He didn't look at all friendly. He said, "Why should Hagarthy hang around and risk recapture just to shoot you, Wyatt?"

"Maybe he was trying to get a horse," Wyatt said, "and figured I'd try to stop him. There was a lot of horses at the Trail's hitchrack, and I was there on the porch. Did you get him?"

"No."

"He sure must be making tracks while you're wasting time here."

"A couple hundred men are out hunting him."

"They'll do a lot of riding, but I'll bet they won't catch him."

"That all you got to say to me, Wyatt?"

"What more do you want me to say?" Wyatt demanded.

Morales looked as though he'd lose his temper. But he merely said, "I'll see you again, amigo, after I've caught Hagarthy," and went out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun Reckoning

DR. HARMON gave Wyatt a dose of brandy, helped him dress, said, "Take it easy, son. Come in and see me tomorrow." Wyatt nodded, told him that he'd pay him for the patching up on payday, and left the office. His legs were wobbly and he kept his left arm pressed tight against his bandaged side. A lot of people were still standing about on the street, but most of the saddle mounts were gone. The boys were having themselves a time, manhunting Bart Hagarthy. Wyatt mounted his horse, rode slowly from town, headed for the DUN, by the wagon road.

He didn't see any of the manhunters along the way.

But, of course, they wouldn't look for Hagarthy in the direction of the ranch whose owner he was accused of killing. Tom Wyatt himself would have believed that DUN headquarters was the last place to look for Bart Hagarthy.

Wyatt rode in at a walk, and so there was no pounding of hoofs to herald his arrival. He saw the ground-hitched horse over by the ranch-house, and guessed that one of the crew had hurried out to tell Jodie and Carole about Hagarthy's escape. Then he realized that the animal was a white horse—and that there was no pure white bronc in the DUN string.

The man who had ridden the animal in, who was now inside the house, could have been a neighbor, some friend of the Dunstan girls.

But Tom Wyatt thought, *Hargarthy!*

It didn't seem too incredible, for Hagarthy was in love with Carole.

Wyatt dismounted. He crossed the ranchyard with gun in hand, stepped silently onto the veranda. Through the parlor window he could see Jodie and her sister standing side by side, facing a man whose back was to the window. But Wyatt didn't need to see the man's face to know that it was Bart Hagarthy.

He moved to the door, as quietly as possible, opened it cautiously, and eased into the hallway. The parlor door was to the right, and stood open, lamplight streaming through it. Wyatt drew a sharp breath, moved to the doorway, and said "Stand still, Hagarthy. Don't pull your gun."

Hagarthy's gun was in his waistband.

The big squatter froze, his voice breaking off in the middle of some angry speech. He moved only to lift his empty hands shoulder high, and to turn his head in Wyatt's direction. His thick yellow hair was tousled. His china-blue eyes were hot with anger. He looked at Wyatt without fear, and he said, "All right. I won't endanger these girls by grabbing for my gun. You've got me, whoever you are."

Carole had cried out. She started toward Hagarthy, but Jodie held her back. Jodie was staring at Wyatt's blood-stained shirt. Wyatt got behind Hagarthy, reached around with his left hand, and pulled the gun from the man's waistband. He tossed the weapon onto a sofa across the room, then backed to the wall so that he had some support. He still felt shaky.

"Why'd you try to kill me, Hagarthy?" he demanded.

"Me? You're loco, mister!"

"You fired three shots at me, before you left town. One hit me."

Hagarthy shook his head. "I didn't shoot at anybody," he said, looking more bewildered now than angry. "Take a look at that gun. It's not been fired. I couldn't have reloaded it, because I haven't any cartridges on me."

Wyatt said, "Jodie, take a look at his gun."

Jodie crossed to the sofa, picked up the sixgun. Handling it expertly, she broke it and examined the cylinder. "It's fully loaded, Tom," she said. "It's clean too."

Now Wyatt looked bewildered. He said, "Who smuggled that gun to you?"

Hagarthy shook his head. "I don't know. Somebody tossed it through my cell window—and beat it in the dark before I got a look at him. I didn't care who it was. I wanted

to get out of there. I knocked Sheriff Hodge down when he brought my supper, and ran out. I grabbed the first horse I saw, and hightailed it away from town. I didn't shoot at you or anybody else. I came here to see Carole before I head for the border." He looked at the dark-haired girl now, his love for her in his eyes. "You've got to believe it," he said. "I didn't kill your father. I wasn't at Coffin Creek that night."

"I believe you, Bart," Carole replied, and there were tears in her eyes. "Bart, if only I had it to do over, I—"

Tom Wyatt didn't hear the rest of it. He paid no attention when Hagarthy, with a choking cry, crossed the room and caught Carole up in his arms. Wyatt was looking at Jodie, and she, looking shaken, pleaded with him—to let Hagarthy escape. Suddenly Wyatt believed that the squatter was telling the truth, and he thought, *That leaves me in it alone.* No. He corrected himself. There had been a man in the brush, with a rifle, and if it hadn't been Hagarthy. . . Tom Wyatt knew. He thought he knew!

HE SAID, "Carole, listen—" He'd spoken loudly, excitedly, and the girl pulled away from Hagarthy to look at him. "Listen," he went on, "this is going to be tough on you, but it's got to be faced. Your father found out that you were to meet Steve Munson at Coffin Creek that night. He locked you in your room, and went out there, himself, to warn Munson to keep away from you. You somehow got Tex Larsen to ride to town with a note for Munson—"

Carole nodded miserably. "I called out the window to Tex."

"You said in that note that Munson shouldn't meet you because your father would be at Coffin Creek," Wyatt went on. "Munson was crazy in love with you and—"

"He's not really in love with me," Carole said dully. "He wants to marry me, but only because he wants to better himself. He thinks that I'm a good catch. He often said to me, "I'll really make something of the DUN when I'm your husband. I'll show Matt Dunstan how to make money—big money—out of cattle." I knew what he really wants, but I—well, I've been an awful fool. Dad told me that night that he'd kill Steve. He'd found out that Steve had abandoned a girl in Tucson, after cheating her out of some money. He knew that Steve is no good. I—" Her voice broke. Carole was no longer the same girl. Her spirit was broken.

Wyatt said, "Munson got an idea when he received your note. He figured that he'd be able to marry you and get control of the DUN, if your father got killed. But he had to work it so that you, Carole, wouldn't suspect him." He paused, saw that Carole, Hagarthy and Jodie were watching him intently. He knew that Jodie would hate him, but he wasn't going to stop now. He'd kept his secret too long.

"There was a stranger in town looking for a job. Munson talked to him, and maybe that's when he planned it. He told the stranger that he might get a job at DUN if he hurried out there, and he urged the stranger to take the Coffin Creek trail. When this stranger left, Munson got a horse and a rifle. He took some shortcut he knew about, got ahead of the stranger without being seen, then, close to Coffin Creek, he left his horse where it wouldn't be noticed and Injunned up through the brush.

"When the stranger came along," Wyatt said, pausing to catch his breath, "Matt Dunstan mistook him for Munson. It was dark, and raining cats and dogs. Matt figured he was saving his daughter from a no-good, and he started shooting. He was crazy mad, and missed the stranger. Scared, the stranger grabbed his saddle gun and fired a shot that downed Matt."

Jodie gasped, "Tom—no!"

He avoided her eyes. "So Munson opened up with his rifle. But he's not much good with a gun, and the stranger got away. Munson wanted to kill the stranger, after Matt was down, so it would look as though those two had killed each other. Maybe he'd figured that Matt would have killed the stranger, and gotten arrested for murder. But it worked out the other way. The stranger was scared and kept quiet, and better still you, Bart, were arrested. But Morales kept prodding the stranger, suspicious of him, and tonight the stranger had a talk with Munson. He told that tricky lawyer that he knew why Matt Dunstan had been at Coffin Creek, and that Morales was trying to make him admit he'd been there, too. So Munson got scared."

Wyatt moved away from the wall, edging toward the door.

He went on tonelessly, "He got another smart idea. He slipped the gun into Bart's

cell, hoping Bart would bust out. When Bart did, Munson was ready. He tried to kill the stranger, so that the stranger would never talk to Morales. But his shooting was bad again. He'd hoped that Bart would be blamed for killing me, but now. . . ."

He was at the hall door.

"That's how it was," he added. "The stranger should have talked long ago, but he was scared and mixed up. He didn't want to kill anybody. He fired the shot in self-defense."

"Tom!" Jodie cried, as he backed into the hall. "Tom, where are you going?"

"To town, to talk to Morales," Wyatt said. "To give myself up. Bart, you keep her here."

He heard Jodie begin to sob as he let himself out. He pulled the front door closed, crossed the veranda, stepped down, started toward his horse which waited by the corrals.

He was halfway across the yard when he heard a horse—not his roan or Hagarthy's white—stamp and switch, and the jingle of a bit chain. He peered about and saw a rider in the shadows of the barn.

A chill fear swept through him, and, as on that night at Coffin Creek, he grabbed automatically for his gun. Powder-flame spurted at him, and the sound of the shot crashed in his ears. He swung his own gun up as the slug shrieked past him, thumbed back the hammer, squeezed the trigger. A gasp came from the man in the shadows. The horse spooked, began to buck, and the man was tossed from the saddle. He hit the ground in a loose heap.

Bart Hagarthy came running over, gun in hand.

"Who is it, Tom? Munson?"

"Yeah. He followed me, to kill me."

"The fool," Hagarthy muttered. "The loco fool."

"He'd gone too far," Tom Wyatt said. "He had to make another try to get me. I should have figured that. He—"

He couldn't talk anymore.

He was wobblier than ever, and suddenly his legs buckled.

THE Deputy Sheriff was one man who anticipated that his escaped prisoner might visit DUN headquarters. Morales rode in ten minutes after the shooting. By that time, Tom Wyatt was lying stretched out on the sofa in the ranchhouse parlor. Bart Hagarthy had carried him there, and Jodie Dunstan was still fussing over him.

Morales had seen Steve Munson's body.

He learned what had happened from Hagarthy, and he didn't seem much surprised. He looked at Tom Wyatt, who lay there weak and dazed, and said, "He lost a lot of blood in town tonight. He'll be all right, when he's rested." He looked at Jodie. "Didn't Matt keep any whiskey around for snakebite remedy?"

Jodie hurried from the room, returned with a bottle and glass.

Morales ignored the glass, uncorked the bottle, poured a dose down Wyatt's throat right from the bottle. Then he dosed himself and passed the bottle to Bart Hagarthy, who also required some of the "remedy."

When Wyatt felt enough like himself to sit up, Morales said, "The reason I suspected that you'd been in on it was because I found a 30-30 slug in the wall of the line cabin there at Coffin Creek. A log was freshly splintered, so the slug was fired into it recently—the night Dunstan was killed, I figured. I sized up angles, and saw that if a rider on the north side of the bridge fired at Dunstan and missed—"

"You trying to say that I—that my shot didn't kill him?"

"I'd stake my reputation on it, amigo."

"Then Munson . . ."

"He must have shot at Dunstan—and hit him—just as you fired your wild shot," Morales said. "Then Munson turned his rifle on you."

Wyatt looked at Jodie. "Jodie, you hear?" he asked, almost shouting it.

Jodie smiled. She came and sat down beside him, took his hand in hers.

Morales said that he would take Munson's body into town with him. He paused in the doorway, and said, "Next time, if there is a next time, which I hope not, just trust a little more in me. You have to in the end, anyway."

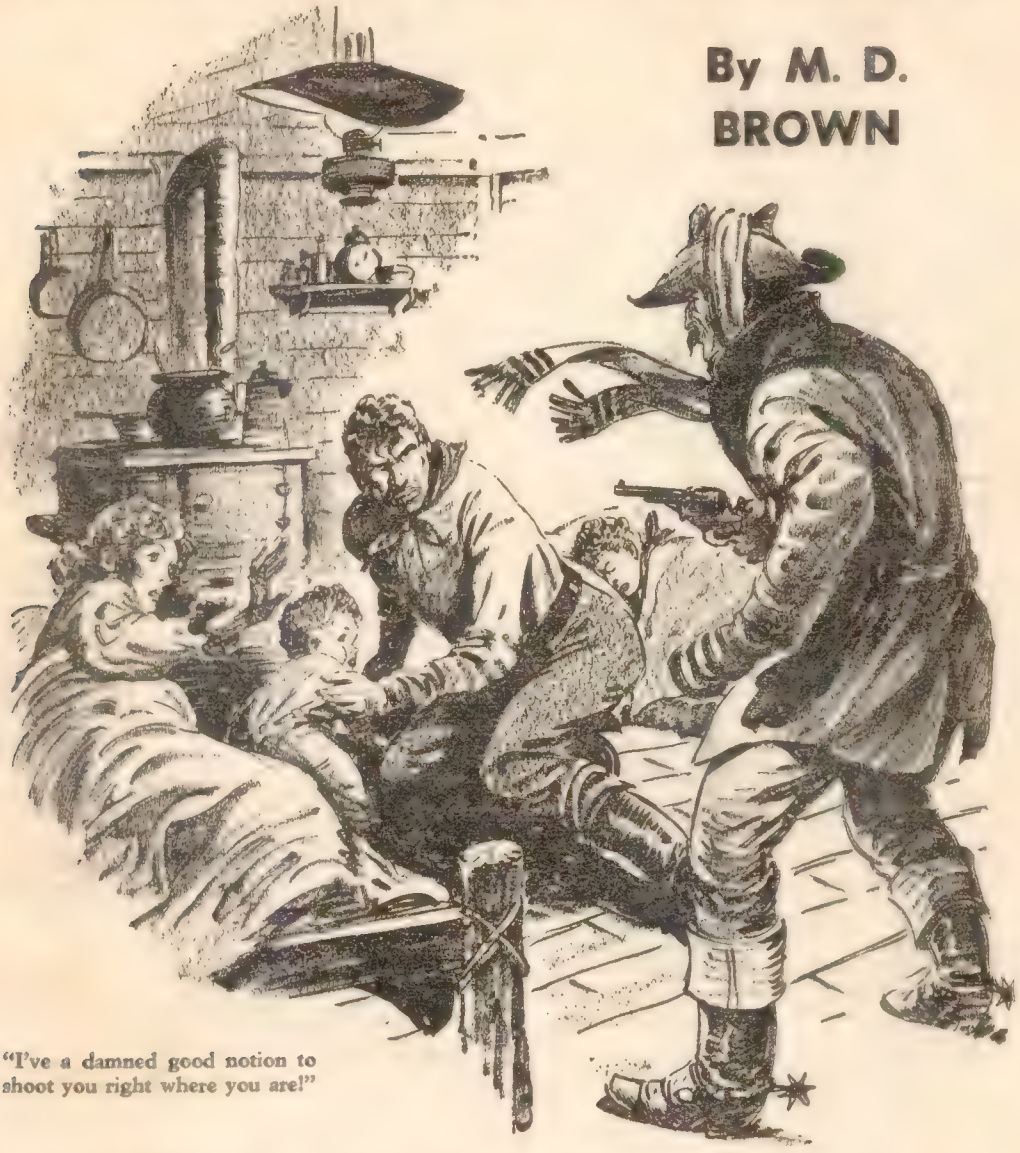
Nobody was listening to him.

At the far end of the room Bart Hagarthy was trying to make Carole understand that the past was to be forgotten. On the sofa, Tom Wyatt sat with Jodie holding his hand —and not looking nearly as sick as he had a few minutes ago.

Deputy Sheriff Juan Morales shrugged and smiled, and went away. ✪ ✪ ✪

WIND OF FURY

By M. D. BROWN



"I've a damned good notion to shoot you right where you are!"

Outlaw Brale had his sights lined on the trail Sheriff Crutcher would be following, when into them stepped some fool homesteader's wife and her two sick kids . . .

FACING the raw November wind, a rider pressed across the mesa, worn chaps plastered to the sides of his horse, battered Stetson shielding his eyes, head bowed above heavy shoulders. When his fingers grew stiff he changed hands on the bridle reins.

Brale swore soundlessly. He had to cross this gray flat to gain the safety of the gorge beyond. Once in the craggy, timbered

wilds of the Toquima, he could easily shake off his pursuers. And they knew that. Brale's eyes gleamed in his square-jawed, weathered face.

Sheriff Crutcher knew that he mustn't let Brale reach the Toquima. That was why the sheriff had cut across from Black Mountain, trying to head him away from the gorge. Crutcher must have ridden all night. A tough bird, and hard to fool. Which gave a man a proportionate satisfaction in fooling him. But you didn't hate him any the less for that.

Brale gained the lip of the cañon and looked back. No one in sight, yet. Below the rim, the bitter wind was cut off as completely as if he had stepped into a house. He could hear it still, in the tops of the towering spruce trees as he picked his way downward among them. Rather, he skidded his way, slipping forty feet with a shale slide, while the bronco sat on its tail; coasting on black earth which was slick as grease from some hidden spring; rounding giant boulders that clung to the precipitous slope; hurling himself from the saddle as the horse went down on its side, betrayed by a tipping slab of sandstone.

Thankful that the animal was not lamed by the fall, Brale led it the rest of the way down. When he reached the stream at the bottom he mounted and rode into the water and down the creek for some distance. He climbed out and followed the bank for a while, then reentered the water.

He turned back now and rode upstream for two miles or more. A low shelf of rock afforded a trackless way to leave the water again. Where was Crutcher by this time? The sheriff would go on down the Toquima, sure that Brale had turned east at the mouth of the gorge and doubled back under some ridge of the Divide. That would be the shortest way out of the state. Brale knew how the sheriff would figure.

He had reason to know. He had lain in a damp county jail for three months previous to his escape. Sheriff Crutcher was still young enough to be intolerant. Law-breakers were all alike to him. He made no distinction between a cold hearted killer and boys who swiped fruit from orchards. He despised them, every one, and showed that he did.

Brale muttered aloud, "To him we're just something that crawls. And he's a fish, without a drop of warm human blood in him."

Crutcher had seemed to take a special delight in rubbing Brale on the raw. Maybe the slim-built sheriff resented the broad shoulders and powerful limbs of his prisoner. Maybe the defiance in Brale's slight swagger and coldly gleaming eye was a challenge. There were a number of things which Brale would not forget, but there was one in particular . . .

A visitor to the jail was passing the cells when he dropped a cigarette from his pack. It rolled close to Brale's door. He had not had a smoke in weeks. He squatted on his heel and reached through the bars for the little white cylinder.

A boot toe drove against his hand, paralyzing it for a moment. Then the heel of the boot was grinding the cigarette to powder on the stone floor, and Crutcher's eyes were looking down at him with sardonic mirth. Memory of the incident had been lost during the absorption of escape and flight. It returned now, trailing a diabolic inspiration.

Instead of following the cañon to its head, as he had planned, he set his horse at the eastern slope and presently climbed out on the knife-like ridge which divided the Toquima from the gorge next to it. Here the wind caught him again, stinging his eyes, numbing his cheeks. He crossed the next, shallower cañon. He kept a sharp lookout, but he was certain that Crutcher would take the quicker and easier route up Badger creek, two miles farther east. And Brale believed that his timing was right.

His plan was simple. He would cut over into the head of Badger and catch the sheriff in the pass. The cañon narrowed, there at the head, to a channel not ten yards wide, but half a mile long and rimmed on both sides by fifty-foot rock walls.

Badger Pass was ideal for Brale's purpose. He would catch the sheriff midway. One careful shot from the rim above was all that was needed. Brale took pride in his markmanship. A bullet in the right spot was worth a murder any day. Murder was just dumb folly, the resort of weaklings. Brale had never killed a man. And, because he worked alone, he had never been suspected of a killing. His robberies were planned with care to avoid any chance of it. But a bullet in an ankle, correctly placed, could do a permanent mischief. It

was Brale's intent that Crutcher should never walk straight again, never grind out a cigarette with his foot. Whether the sheriff went up or down cañon in pursuit, Brale could get safely away before Crutcher cleared the walls.

As the fugitive came out on the next ridge, he could see the distant silhouette of the pass. The line of the rims might have been drawn with a ruler against the dun sky. Crutcher should make it into the notch about sundown.

At Brale's feet lay a small valley, pine-studded. Here, to his surprise, was a new homesteader's cabin and a corral. In a pasture below the cabin grazed a cow and two horses. A wagon stood by the corral fence. Someone had taken up land on the Reserve since he was last in this part of the county. Someone who had not yet moved to the lower country, as all homesteaders must before the deep snow came. He would have time to stop and get something to eat. How that infernal wind did blow up here! The nearer to the crest of the Divide he came, the worse it was.

As he approached the cabin he saw a few hens hunched disconsolately about the door, unable to forage because of the wind. An old dog, snugged down against the wall, raised his head and thumped his tail ingratiatingly.

Brale dismounted and walked slowly forward, brows drawn. Something out of kilter here. The animals looked neglected, hungry. Had the owner just walked off and left them?

He raised his hand to knock, and stopped. Through the roar of the wind about the building his ear had caught a sound beyond the door. He stood with head bent, listening. Something was being slowly dragged or shoved across the floor. Suddenly there was a heavy thump, followed by another sound—was it a cry?

Hand on gun butt, Brale lifted the latch and pushed the door open.

A WOMAN'S voice cried, "Oh, my dear, I'm so glad you've come—"

The sentence broke off. A young woman was trying to get up from the floor where she had fallen. She pulled her wrapper quickly about her and rested on an elbow, staring up at the intruder, her pale face going white.

Brale became aware of other things. A baby was whimpering in a bunk, and a boy of five was sitting beside the box stove, bundled in blankets. Brale's eyes came back to the woman. He took an uncertain step toward her.

"Are you hurt, ma'am?"

The fright died out of her face as she studied him. She nodded, and the child by the stove croaked, "Old Doll got outa the pasture yesterday and Mom went to hunt her and a tree blew on her."

The woman smiled. Her tone was apologetic. "The wind was making so much noise that I didn't hear the tree coming down. Luckily, I'd found the cow and was nearly home when it happened." She smiled again. "Would you mind closing the door?"

Hastily Brale turned to obey. The cabin seemed very still with the wind shut out.

"You—you oughtn't to lie there, ought you, ma'am?" He was embarrassed. He looked away from her face, pinched with suffering, and her tousled hair.

"I'll rest a minute," she told him. "It's my hip that's hurt. . . . I was lucky not to get caught out there." She looked from the baby to the boy by the stove, and Brale guessed what she had gone through to get back to her children. He offered, "Maybe I'd better help you."

"If you'd give me your hand," she said gratefully, "and just steady me a little. I've been getting around with one knee on the chair, but it slipped out from under me somehow. I can stand or lie flat, but I can't seem to sit up."

She tried not to lean on him, but the injured hip gave suddenly. He caught her, and drew a startled breath. Why, she wasn't any heavier than a kitten! He picked her up, awkwardly but carefully, and laid her on the bunk beside the baby.

"What'll I do next, ma'am?"

To his consternation her eyes filled with tears. "This is awfully good of you!"

Brale turned with relief to the boy, who began coughing hard. The mother tried to keep the fright out of her tone.

"We used up the last of the syrup. The coughing seems to hurt him so!"

Brale patted the child's back. "Hang on, guy . . . You got any coal oil, ma'am?"

She looked at him, wondering. "Yes, of course. Why?"

Brale answered, "My mother—" how long had it been since those words had passed his

lips? — "my mother used to give it to us for a cough."

"I never heard of it. Are you sure it won't hurt him?"

"Not a bit, ma'am. You just wet some sugar in a spoon with it. Tell me where to find things."

The cough was stopped, but the boy was very sick. One moment his face was hot to the touch, and the next he was shaking with a chill. The mother tried to get off the bunk.

Brale told her, "Just you lie still, ma'am, and tell me what to do. I'm not such a bear at this business, but I'll do what you say."

He put the boy to bed and fed the dog and chickens. Back in the cabin, his glance rested on the fretting baby.

"What's the matter with that one?"

"She misses her milk," the mother explained. "I did get out to the corral last night, but the cow wouldn't stand still for me."

"I'll go milk."

'It won't be any good, after her not being milked for so long. But maybe we can get some that's all right by morning." She hesitated. "I—I don't want to impose on you."

Brale heard himself saying, "That's all right, ma'am. Of course, I'll have to be moving on pretty quick. You wasn't figuring on staying up here all winter?"

"Oh, no! My husband intended to move us out before this, but he's been too busy. I'm expecting him soon."

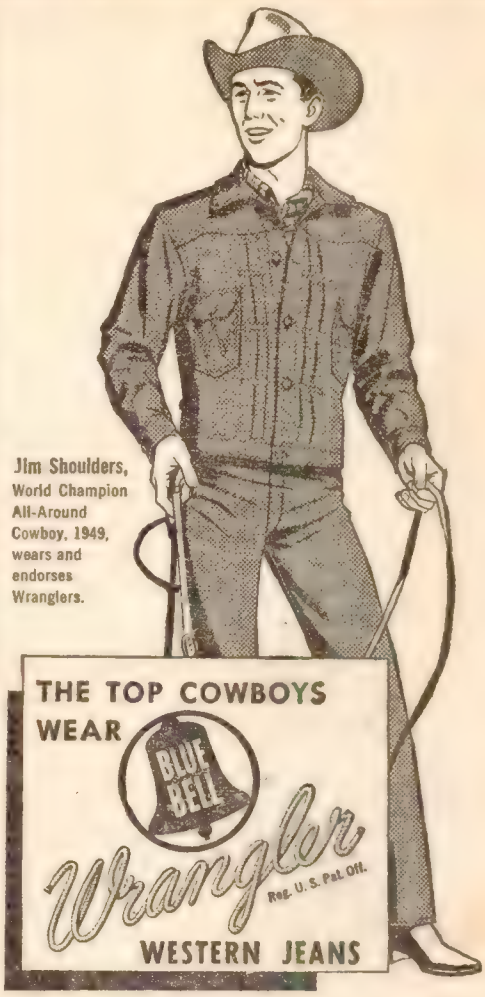
As Brale drove the cow from the pasture, he looked once toward Badger Pass. It was sundown. He had lost a matchless opportunity for revenge. He shrugged, and turned the cow into the corral.

* * *

"If only the wind would go down!"

"It'll likely slack off some after midnight, ma'am."

Brale had been washing the dishes, setting the cabin to rights. Might as well put in the time. He had to wait, anyhow, to milk that cow again. He would do it about daylight and then go. He couldn't wait longer than that. And the woman had said she could get by all right. Brale had chopped a week's supply of firewood and piled it inside the door. This wind would kick up a snowstorm before it quit.



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WORLD'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF WORK CLOTHES

By the light of the kerosene lamp he fashioned a rude crutch from an aspen pole. With this and the chair to steady her, the woman declared herself fit to cope with the situation. She was cheerful. The boy had fallen asleep. She looked around the roughly tidied room and then at the man.

"If I'd take the rest of my days for it, I couldn't thank you for what you've done."

Brale said abruptly, "I just thought of something," and walked out.

He hadn't just thought of it. It had entered his mind during his first hour in the cabin. The fretful wail of the baby was getting on his nerves.

He found his saddle and took from the pack behind the cantle a can of condensed milk. It was the only one he'd been able to purloin from a country store, and it was practically priceless. But what the hell!

He went back to the house. "I'd oughta remembered this first thing, ma'am."

In a little while the baby was asleep, thumb in mouth. And the mother slept beside her child. Brale blew out the light and stretched himself on the floor with a grunt of relief. It had been a long day.

HE WAS roused by a sound that seemed to crash right in his ear. He was on his feet, gun out, before his eyes were fairly open. The only light in the room was a flicker from the stove. The voice of the woman came through the gloom.

"I'm so sorry! I tried not to waken you, but I dropped my crutch."

Then Brale heard the boy coughing. There was a frightening new quality to the sound. When he had lighted the lamp he brought the child to the mother. He sat on his heels beside the bunk, the boy in his arms. The woman's anxious hand went over the racked little body.

"He's choking! Oh, dear God, he's choking!"

"What'll I do, ma'am?"

She tried to be calm. "If we could only break up that phlegm in his throat, so he could get rid of it. But I don't know what—"

Brale suggested, "There's some turpentine in the cupboard."

She nodded. "I mixed it with lard and rubbed it on his chest and throat, but it didn't seem to help."

"Mightn't we put a little down his throat?"

"The turpentine?" She looked startled. "But it may be dangerous."

"This choking is pretty dangerous."

It seemed a desperate measure. She tried to hold the child still while Brale got a drop of the raw liquid into the closing throat, but she hadn't the strength.

Brale handed her the bottle, took the boy and laid him flat on the floor. He clamped the small, squirming body firmly between his knees.

"Now, bub, we'll see about this."

The mother lay on her side and held the bottle over the edge of the bunk to pour a little of the liquid into a spoon. Brale kept the boy's head still with one broad hand, waited for the right moment, and let a bit of the turpentine slide down the tongue.

The spoon dropped with a clatter as he lifted and turned the child, and patted him vigorously on the back. The treatment was repeated, with violent and satisfactory results. The boy was sobbing with fright. The mother, half-laughing, half-crying, drew him into her arms.

"My poor darling! I never knew I'd be glad to hear you cry like that!"

The baby wakened, wailing. The boy wanted to stay in his mother's bed. He fell quickly asleep. Brale replenished the fire. Then, seeing it was torture for the woman to lie on her back with an arm around each child, he put the boy again into his own bed. She turned on her side with a long drawn breath of relief, and Brale said, "Seems to me you're the one needs looking after."

She smiled drowsily. "I'll be—all—" She was asleep.

Brale stood looking at her for a minute. Then he lay down on the floor again.

When he awakened it was dawn, and he could hear the wind once more rising. With full daylight it was a gale. He milked and turned the cow out to pasture, and fed the hens and the old dog. The animals now followed every step he took outside.

When he returned to the cabin he found the woman lying rigidly still on her bunk, her cheeks like paper. He set down the milk pail and stepped quickly toward her. She had been trying to hide her pain, but it had her nearly whipped, he saw. She looked up at him.

"It—seems to be—worse—this morning."

"What can I do, ma'am?"

"Maybe—heat would help. If you could —warm—some stones on top—of the stove —" she swallowed— "and wrap them—in something." Her voice trailed off in a whisper.

Brale built up the fire and went to find stones that would serve. The boy was better, though very weak. He was a tractable patient and slept most of the time. The baby was another matter. The cow's milk restored her practically to normal and created a succession of problems. Some of them were embarrassing to Brale, but he strove to assume the matter-of-fact attitude of the mother. In the face of her agony he could do no less. The hot stones eased her pain a little and she slept fitfully during the day.

With his hospital safely wrapped in slumber, Brale went out to build a stanchion in the corral. That would insure the cow standing still to be milked. The wind was colder today and the sky darker.

Brale thought of Crutcher. By this time the sheriff would be at the state line, or maybe on his way back. And in a black rage over his failure. Crutcher, however, was the lesser of Brale's worries. What was he going to do about this woman? Could he just ride off and leave her? But he must be getting out of here. Maybe he could send some word to that worthless husband of hers. Leaving a woman and two kids in a place like this! The woman had explained that they had taken up the claim as a summer camp for the cattle business which they hoped some day to own.

By nightfall Brale still didn't know what to do. He was riding herd on the baby. To keep the small girl from crawling off her blanket, he sat on the floor beside her and steered her explorations. The wind howled outside, but it was bright and warm in the cabin.

The woman lay watching them, her teeth closed on her pain. It occurred to Brale that maybe she didn't have a husband any more, that maybe the fellow had quit her. If that was it, she sure was in a jam.

He glanced up to meet in her eyes an expression he couldn't read. The baby started off the blanket. Brale picked up a corner and rolled her gently back. She gurgled with delight and crawled slowly back to be rolled again.

THE cabin door burst open. The slim height of Sheriff Crutcher filled the opening. His cocked gun was pointed at Brale's heart. For seconds there was no sound or movement, only the scurrying wind.

"Sit still," said Crutcher. His voice shook with repressed fury, and Brale thought, *I knew he'd be sore.*

The sheriff closed the door with his heel. He walked slowly toward Brale. His gun muzzle scarcely moved as he stooped and snatched the baby from her blanket. He was so rough about it that she shrieked with fright.

Crutcher backed a step, holding the struggling child. He said thickly. "You came *here*! I've a damn good notion to shoot you where you are!" He turned to the woman lying on the bunk, staring at him. "And you! You knew who he was! But you took him in! Get off that bed!"

Then, looking at her, his face changed a little. Something in her fascinated expression, in her marble immobility, pierced his fogged brain. He heard Brale's voice, quiet, loaded.

"Even I didn't know you were such a yellow cur!"

Crutcher's gun hand jerked, but Brale did not move. His contempt was so genuine that it stopped the other.

"Jim—" the woman's voice was little more than a whisper in that pool of stillness at the center of the wind's tumult—"Jim, this man saved the life of your son. He's waited on us hand and foot. I—I'm hurt, you see. A tree blew on me . . . Give me the baby, Jim."

Mechanically Crutcher handed her the sobbing child. The passion had died in the sheriff's face, but his tone was harsh.

"Just the same, he's a criminal. You asking him for help don't change my duty."

"I didn't ask him for a thing. And until you stepped in that door he didn't know who I was."

"It don't make any difference what—"

Across the sheriff's rasp cut Brale's level voice.

"So you knew me."

She turned her head to look at him. Her eyes pleaded for understanding.

"If you had gone on, I wouldn't've said a word to stop you. I knew the risk, if you stayed." She averted her glance from his still face. "I intended you should go

this morning. But—when I was so much worse—It was the children. They're such helpless mites."

Crutcher broke the silence. "Get up."

Brale stood up.

"Hold out your hands."

Brale obeyed. Crutcher, producing handcuffs, stepped toward him.

"Jim." There was a note in the woman's voice which made both men look toward her.

She asked, "Are you going to take this man in?"

"Of course I'm going to take him in!"

"No! Never!"

The man and wife stared at one another, and Brale saw the love between them. Crutcher did have human blood in him, after all.

"You can't do it, Jim! He could have got away. He stayed to help us!"

"That don't make any difference! He's a —"

"No!" she repeated. "If you do this thing, after what he did for us —" She did not go on, but her eyes were inflexible.

Crutcher's face was haggard. He saw where this was leading them. But it wasn't in him to yield.

Brale saw that he couldn't stop, having come this far. He couldn't quit now. The two turned, startled by his laugh.

"Didn't you ever figure it out, ma'am?"

"What?"

"That he's got to put up that front, the job he's in?"

Her glance shifted back to Crutcher. Brale also sent him a look which said, "Play up, damn you!"

"You see, ma'am, he knows mighty well I wouldn't try to buy my escape with what little I did for you. But he's acted the stern law dog till he's darn near lost his likeness to anything human. (*Will the dumb ox come across?*) Still, at that, it's a tough job, ma'am. He'd never let even you know how tough."

She choked, "But—you!"

Again Brale laughed. "In my business there's no point in beefing when the breaks are against you." He said to the sheriff, "My gun's hanging on a nail over there by the door."

Crutcher, forty-five still poised and handcuffs dangling, stared at him, scowling.

Brale said easily, "We got to get 'em out of here. It's going to snow."

Crutcher glanced toward the bunk where his son slept. He asked his wife, "Can we take him out?"

"If he's kept wrapped up."

"And you?"

"I'll make it."

Brale looked at Crutcher. "She could never stand it to lie in the wagon bed. She's had hell's own. But if you hold her I can drive."

Crutcher regarded his prisoner in silence. His mind did not adjust itself easily to a new conception of criminals.

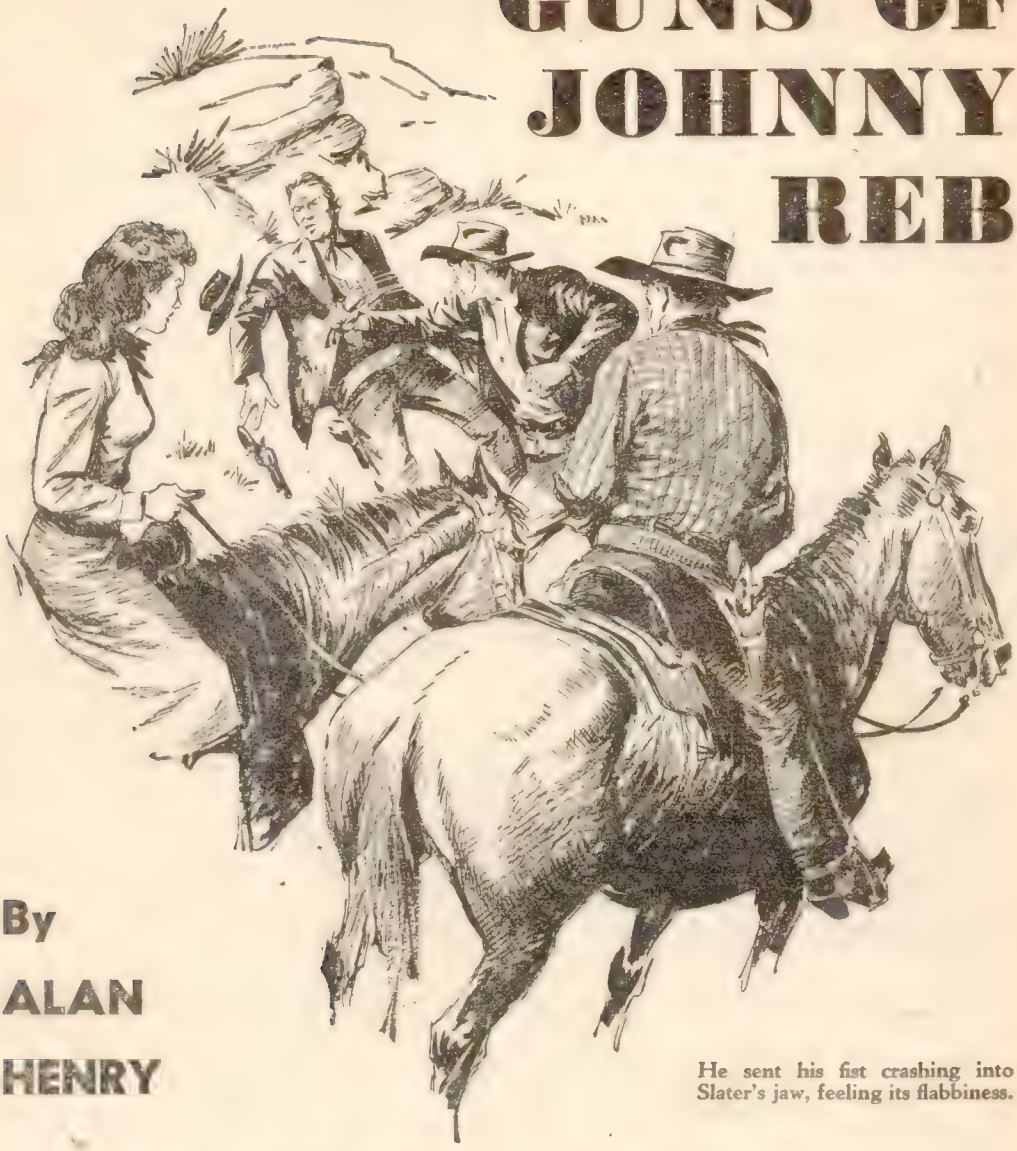
At last he nodded. ✪ ✪ ✪

ARKANSAS TRAVELER

An angry mob jacked up Little Rock, rolled the Arkansas capital off to a new site. In 1820, William Russell, a land speculator, laid claim to the land on which the Little Rock settlers had built their cabins. Eventually, the Territorial court sustained his claim. Infuriated, the settlers gathered into a noisy mob, finally hit upon a course of action. They jacked up their cabins, used wheels or logs to roll them off to new sites on nearby land owned by the friendly Quapaws. Almost immediately thereafter Little Rock became the Territorial capital.

The traveler to New Orleans from St. Louis via steamboat shelled out $20.00 for cabin fare. On the return trip, upstream, he paid $25.00 for cabin fare. Deck fare cost him $5.00 either way. The round trip usually consumed 24 days—barring anything but the always-to-be-expected delays caused by snags, sandbars, shifting channels and storms.

GUNS OF JOHNNY REB



He sent his fist crashing into Slater's jaw, feeling its flabbiness.

By ALAN HENRY

The War Between the States was over for everyone but Chad Doane and his Rebel guns—and even he was willing to quit . . . any time he met a damnyankee he couldn't outdraw.

HALFWAY up the rear outside steps leading to the top floor of the Little Creek Saloon, Chad Doane stopped abruptly. His lean fingers gripped the peeled-cottonwood handrail. Through the dark of the prairie night, the unexpected light flashed distantly, zig-zag.

Chad stared into space, seeing now only the black void, and his nails bit deep into the handrail. A man couldn't ever forget, it seemed. Nothing would let him forget that once, five years gone, he wore the gray and carried a Minea rifle.

Take that flashing light. He'd seen it

before in the western Kansas border lands. Old buffalo bones, grown phosphorescent, suddenly flashing in the dark. But this night it sharpened Chad's bitter memory. The light was like Appomattox that streaked across his world, destroyed it, and left him in a void.

It had brought him to this—climbing the back steps of a rowdy Yank saloon to meet Tom Slater, damnyankee scum; to close a bargain for his damnyankee greenbacks. Chad turned Slater's name over his tongue, and it churned with the gall down to the pit of his stomach.

Well, a man needed a money-stake if he was to stay in a land that didn't want him. Chad wanted to stay in this border country. He'd wanted to stay ever since he first prodded the longhorn up-trail from San Antone. This was big country, clean and new. Good country for a man wanting a fresh start. It was good country even with the Yanks, and scavengers like Slater spreading all over it. What difference did it make how a man got his money-stake?

Chad set that in his mind and kept telling himself it was so. It made no difference. A man who'd worn the gray didn't get a decent chance, except from Tom Slater's sort.

He stepped quickly to the head of the stairs, and into a narrow passageway lit by an overhanging coal-oil lamp. A single door marked the end of the passageway. The lamp cast his shadow on the near rough-wood wall, and Chad halted, wryly studying it. This shadow was like the man in him now, distorted. He shrugged it off; strode to the door and pushed it open.

Slater sat at a green-covered round table in the far corner of the long room. "Howdy, Chad," he said, as if he had known all along that Chad was coming. "Reckoned you'd be thinking some, and change your mind." Slater cleared his whisky-coarsened voice, stroked his heavy jowl and, eyes beading, asked, "Do you ride to Sedgewick City?"

"Tonight." Chad drew his lips into a straight, hard line. A man was a man no longer, forced by things beyond him to deal with the likes of Slater.

"Hell, Chad, why not?" Slater grinned, pawing his black string tie. "They gave you a gun, didn't they? So now you get to use it, personal, for your own good. Not a thing wrong with that from where I sit."

Swiftly Tom Slater reached inside his broadcloth; then laid on the table an ornate buckskin wallet. He counted greenbacks slowly, making a ceremony of it.

"One-hundred-fifty, Chad. All yours. And lots more come two days, if Sedgewick City doesn't get to vote against the bonds for the railroad to Little Creek. The county law says the voting's got to be held in the courthouse. All you got to do is take over the courthouse, and stop the voting till me and my riders show. We'll do the necessary, seeing to it only the right folks get to ballot." He shoved the money heap to table edge.

Chad reached out slowly, feeling the moistness of his palm as he crumpled the greenbacks into it. He was no better than this scheming carpet-bagger who played for bonds for a railroad that would never be built. Worse than Slater, because he bargained for a money-stake, with a hatred in him, besides.

"The town's Yank settled. The wrong kind. You know what I mean, Chad. Set it so they'll take you for a whipped Reb looking for a place to light." Slater half shut his eyes, chuckling. "Whipped Reb. Chad, that'll be a good one on the Yanks." He glanced up, and away again, as if to meet Chad's eyes.

The walls of the room seemed to crowd in on Chad, then. It wasn't the 'whipped Reb.' It was the look of Slater; and, maybe, what he wasn't saying. Chad had the feeling of a man about to be boxed into a prime jackpot.

"It'll be like whipping Yanks all over again," Slater said quickly. The hoarseness left his voice, and it was almost soft and mellow. "Folks say a Reb's not to be trusted. I don't go along with that. Never did, Chad. So don't take it, personal. I reckon you won't be forgetting you took Tom Slater's money?"

The money crumpled tighter into Chad's fist. He wanted to send fist and money smashing into the mouth of this man who talked from both sides of it at the same time. This man who was Yank or Reb to suit, and still didn't trust another. He watched Slater's hand sweep under the table, as though preparing to use it as a shield.

"I took your money," Chad said slowly. "And how was it to be, Slater?"

"No voting in Sedgewick City, come two days. I've got the votes right here in Little Creek to put the railroad bonds across."

"I took your money," Chad repeated. "I'm a Reb, but I've made a bargain."

"Sure, Chad. Certain-sure." Slater grinned widely. He slapped his hand on the table. "It'll be easier than taking Bull Run."

"Easier than Bull Run," Chad murmured.

Behind him, as he reached the steps, Chad heard the tread of Slater's boots. And, he knew, that Slater stood now at the top landing, watching him. But Chad didn't look back. Stars filled the sky. Yet the night and all else appeared darker than ever.

The strains of a fiddle drifted out of the saloon's batwing doors. A tinny piano raced behind, doing a Yank song that Chad wouldn't name to himself. Yet he stood by the plank walk, listening. The piano started to gain, caught up, and then the two rode even keel. It made Chad feel a little better. He couldn't exactly explain why, except it seemed that somehow, if a man kept pounding away he got to even up the score.

The batwings swung wide. A man in jeans and hickory shirt wobbled through, shouting, "Come on in, Johnny-boy! Belly up on the house. Tom Slater's money." He stumbled a little closer, peered at Chad, and shook his head disgustedly. "Reb," he muttered; and wobbled back into the saloon.

That brought Chad up, sharp. He untied the reins of his sorrel horse, and put the mount north for Sedgewick City, some thirty miles away and across the ford of the Little Arkansas.

THE man stood tall and straight as the newel-post near which he waited. His jaw showed prominently in an angular face tanned by sun and wind. The deep-set eyes were stern, unmistakably sad, and fixed inquiringly on Chad.

"Ride the river, sunup?"

"Sunup," Chad said.

He'd set the sorrel over the ford, seeing no one at the post then, or on the plank walk that fronted the small frame building. The black-painted sign across its flare, read: *Courthouse.*

The man's hands hung easily at his sides. He wore plaid shirt, and store pants. The butt of a sixgun showed at his waist.

Slowly, Chad walked the sorrel to a scarred hitching-rack near by. And, sidelong, he caught the man's inquiry change

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swiftly to a cold, calculating appraisal.

"You been to Little Creek?"

But Chad couldn't tell whether there was conclusion in the question. He shrugged, saying, "If Little Creek's south, I might have passed through."

"Texas Johnny?"

Chad stood mute. The man kept his steady gaze.

"Sedgewick City's open to all," he said. "All who come here, peaceful. Seeing's how the boys have voted me mayor, you've got Phil Hanly's word for the way things are in Sedgewick City." Hanly paused, as though waiting now for Chad to speak out.

Chad spoke his own name; nothing more.

The wide earth-trampled street lay quiet. The frame houses scattered among the flare-fronted drab stores, all appeared to be waiting too.

Phil Hanly's boots scraped loudly across the wood walk. He glanced right, and then to the left, stepping to the edge.

Now other footsteps broke the silence, heavily from one direction, lightly from the other.

Chad's hand swept inside his sacque coat, and rested on his sixgun. He turned at an angle, commanding every approach.

Hanly's hands still hung easily at his sides. "An honest man riding into Sedgewick City doesn't need a weapon," he said. "There'll be none to throw down on you here, if you've come meaning no harm."

A man, tall and thin as Hanly himself, walked rapidly out of a store on the right-hand side, the marshal's star glistening on his dark wool shirt.

And a girl hurried from a small, white-frame cottage on the left, the wind moulding a light calico dress to her supple-hipped body.

Chad's hand fell away from his coat. He tightened his brow, puzzled, as he glanced quickly from one to the other. This was Yank style, bringing a just-grown woman to stack the odds against him and his gun.

The girl slowed her walk, as if that, too, had been planned.

The marshal drew abreast, eyes shifting over Chad then settling on the sorrel at the hitching-rack. He looked up at Hanly, and shook his head.

"The rider I shot at mounted a roan. He's not the man, Phil."

"He could have changed horses across the ford. And he's not saying where he's from, though that's rightly his concern if he's so minded."

"It was a roan horse," the marshal insisted.

"I rode this sorrel last night, and sunup," Chad said. "Seems like you'd know that with the river ford being watched."

"Fred Toland's marshal. He says it was a roan horse, and you're not the man." Phil Hanly nodded at the girl; and she quickened her stride. "Might be my sister Mary can say. She's got right good reason for being able to."

"This man's a stranger, I'm figurin'." The marshal hitched his gun belt. "If he acts up we'll know he's got friends over the ford, and we'll run him out, pronto. There's trouble aplenty with Tom Slater, without lookin' for more."

Phil Hanly eyed the marshal in a way that made Chad wonder; but the mayor kept silent, watching as his sister approached.

The girl's lips were sternly set. Yet Chad sensed the softness that might be in them. Her glance swept swiftly over Chad, from his slouch campaign hat down to his lone-star-marked boots. Then Mary Hanly openly searched his face; and Chad read indecision in her clear gray eyes. That made him wonder too, for, he knew, he'd mounted no horse except his own sorrel.

"He wouldn't be the man, Mary," the marshal said.

And Phil Hanly silenced him at once. "Let Mary say."

Mary's eyes swept over him again, briefly resting on his campaign hat. Chad read indecision still in her eyes. Then, he thought, her glance went quickly to the pocket of his coat. Tom Slater's money, crumpled as he'd taken it from him, lay there. The taint of that money seemed now to burn through the pocket and into Chad's skin. He faced her, pretending a steadiness he didn't feel. He kept telling himself Mary Hanly was a Yank, too. It could make no difference to him whatever she thought.

"I don't know, Phil," Mary Hanly told her brother. "I'm not sure. Maybe it is as the marshal says. I didn't rightly see, neither the man nor his horse yesterday evening. And it all happened so quickly. I was paces clear of the far bank of the river when the rider galloped out of the willows, trying to whip up my mount."

"Ma'am, I'm not the one to whip up a horse and a lady astride," Chad said.

But only the marshal seemed to agree, silently nodding his head.

"I'm thinking," Mary Hanly said, "the man wore his soft hat that brim low you couldn't see his face. It surprised him some that I kept my piebald's reins, and wheeled townward. The marshal rode over the rise of the near bank then, shooting. The man scurried off. For Little Creek and Tom Slater, I'm thinking." Now Mary Hanly held her eyes full on Chad.

"I hide my face from no man, or woman," Chad said. He saw the quick flicker of her eyes and the disappointment that was in her, as if she had hoped he'd say he hadn't been to Little Creek and didn't know Tom Slater.

Slowly, Mary turned to her brother. "I'll not say he was the rider, Phil. I'll not say, this moment, he tried to kidnap me for Tom Slater."

And Chad shut his mind to what would be said when the time came for him to take over Sedgewick City's courthouse. That was his only bargain; a bargain made out of hate. But he'd taken Slater's money. He was Slater's man, and he wallowed in the same mud.

The marshal flipped a hand across the flank of Chad's sorrel, as if to show here was the real answer to the jackpot. Then smiling, he stepped close to Mary Hanly. "Don't you fret," he said. "Not so long as I'm wearin' the star in Sedgewick City. Don't you fret none at all, Mary. Won't anyone try again to run you in to Little Creek for Tom Slater."

Chad resented the smile, and he resented the marshal's little speech. He turned back his mind to the marshal's coming up in good time to shoot and scare away Tom Slater's rider; and Chad resented that too. He had to remind himself that he was here because he hated all Yanks, no matter how they dressed.

"There's a why to all this, Chad Doane," Hanly said. "I'm taking it that you don't already know Slater sent a rider to kidnap my sister."

Chad was silent, not looking at Mary but feeling the intensity of her gaze.

"Sedgewick City votes tomorrow, Chad Doane. A voting on bonds—bonds for a railroad that'll never be built. Tom Slater's railroad, and Tom Slater's bonds. He lined his greedy pockets while the armies marched and blood was on the land. He wants the blood in this new country so he can keep piling up greenbacks. He'll not let a man build again, nor forget the looting's five years gone." Phil Hanly's glance went briefly to his sister. "Slater fights a man's war, trying to use a woman to force a bargain."

Color tinged the healthy tan of Mary's cheeks. "Neither he nor his rider will ever get me to Little Creek. But even that wouldn't matter, Phil. I wouldn't let you bargain with him. I wouldn't want the bonds voted on my account. I'd make Slater wait until the Arkansas dried up."

Shrugging, the marshal said, "Sedgewick City's got enough votes to lick Tom Slater and Little Creek."

"That's the why of it," Phil Hanly said.

Now Chad heard the movement all around him. Sedgewick City stirred. A knot of armed men blocked off the approach to the river ford. A second group already waited at the other end of the street, barring the way where the prairie rolled high.

"Stay in Sedgewick City if you can, Chad Doane," Hanly said quietly.

The look that Mary flashed at Chad needed no speaking. To her brother's words, it added plainly, *if Tom Slater sent you, stay if you dare.*

The marshal stood expectantly. It seemed to Chad, then, his stance wasn't as a marshal ready to make the first move against him; but a questioning wait to see what Chad would do.

Chad faced Phil Hanly. "I've tied the sorrel to your hitching-rack."

The marshal quickly relaxed. "A man could change horses across the ford," he told Hanly. "But he'd be a fool to ride back." The marshal turned then, as though to signal the groups of men that all was well. And as he turned, Chad thought he caught, crossing the marshal's face, a swift knowing look meant for him alone.

Hanly glanced at the marshal, back at Chad, and said, "The man'd be a fool to ride to Sedgewick City."

CHAD reined up at the near bank of the river ford. The marshal's knowing look this forenoon had fixed itself in his mind. But afterwards the marshal had left him strictly alone, as had Phil Hanly and his sister Mary. Sedgewick City ignored him

too. Yet, Chad knew, there was an endless watching. The town watched, and waited.

Taking over the courthouse, holding it against the Yanks wouldn't be hard. It had a front door only. The rear was windowless, a solid wall to the prairie. A man and his gun could hold out as long as need be. Chad knew that, too; and it wasn't important now.

He thought of Mary Hanly, and Tom Slater's double-play. Slater had sent him here to Sedgewick City to divert attention. Slater's real playing ace for the railroad bonds was Mary Hanly. And Slater would send his rider for her again; maybe, this time, come himself. Chad tried convincing himself that the holding hostage of a just-grown woman was no hair in his butter . . . and couldn't.

The waters of the Little Arkansas ran clear-bottomed. Chad wondered how it would be if he threw in Tom Slater's greenbacks, and rode out of Sedgewick City. He saw his answer as clearly. It would wash away nothing. His bargain was sealed. He had Tom Slater's money. But he'd made no bargain to help kidnap Mary Hanly.

Chad raised his head toward the willow trees that lined an area of the far bank. It was a short distance across the water. A man coming over the rise from this side might make out the gray or white flecking of a roan horse there, as the marshal said he had. But a man might also draw his weapon and let go into the air, if there was a hitch in a plan. Like Mary Hanly handling the reins that smart her mount didn't break away when suddenly whipped up.

A stomping sound echoed above the river's gurgling. Chad straightened up, peering hard. There was no stirring in the willows. He heard only the river now. Chad put the sorrel splashing across.

He rode in slowly; then at the gallop passed the willows, wheeled suddenly and headed in behind the trees. Chad replaced his sixgun, seeing Mary astride the piebald.

"They oughtn't let you come out here, ma'am," Chad said. "Wouldn't be much trouble for a rider to find you."

"You knew where, Chad Doane," she said softly. "Tom Slater's man tried to whip up the piebald here. Wouldn't you have known where to find me without the piebald's stomping?"

"I reckon so. Considering you've already mentioned where it was the rider came. But, ma'am, don't be putting me on a roan when it's plain to see I'm not mounting one. The marshal said the rider came on a roan. Doesn't the marshal's word mean that much to you?"

"Never mind what the marshal's word means." She gripped the reins, tighter. Chad saw hesitation briefly shade her face. "You're a Johnny-Reb, aren't you? Who'd trust a Reb? Didn't Tom Slater send you, knowing how you hated us?"

She might have whip-lashed Chad then, and he could have take it better. But he sat quietly, trying not to show the hurt, saying, "I'll not answer you now."

"No, I didn't think you would." Mary spoke bitterly. "You couldn't answer back in town, talking to my brother Phil. You can't now—or ever, without showing what you really are. A licked Johnny-Reb wanting to take your revenge how and where you can get it. Why don't you try carrying me off to Little Creek now? We're alone—" She sat erect, defiantly.

"You're baiting a mighty dangerous trap," Chad said. "Seems like you'd best be riding back across the ford with me. And don't forget to tell your brother the trap wouldn't spring—"

Chad reached out suddenly, grasping for the piebald's bridle. Mary flicked the reins; the piebald whirled, streaked past Chad and headed for open country.

And Chad sat the sorrel, watching, not sure what to do. The trap might lie out there beyond the willows. Phil Hanly and his Yanks waiting on the prairie; waiting to catch him ride in pursuit of Mary. Nor was Chad certain now where the marshal stood with Tom Slater. Chad glanced through the trees toward the silent town—at Mary Hanly disappearing over a far rise—and he galloped the sorrel out of the willows after her.

She was gone when Chad rode up on the rise. The land fell and rose again into little rolling hills stretching toward the horizon. He listened for the echoing of the piebald's hoofs, but heard only the sough of wind through a nearby straggle of cottonwoods.

This was a fool thing that Mary Hanly had done, testing him so. He leaned forward, muttering to the sorrel, "Damnfool Yank girl." He swept the endless bluestem, sat up and shouted, "Come back, Mary Hanly!" The prairie threw back his call derisively.

Then, as the echo died away, a sudden

thudding replaced it; a thudding as of many mounted men, some from the direction of Sedgewick City, and others somewhere behind Chad along the route to Little Creek. The thudding ended as suddenly as it had started.

Chad looked to the rise next behind him; and knew what must be done. Bring all of them out into the open. The sixgun flashed into his hand. He held it high in the air, and let go.

As the explosion ebbed into silence, Chad rode down the rise. He dismounted, and clambered to the crest, seeing just above it the whole sweep of the land.

Mary Hanly galloped the piebald out of the straggle of cottonwoods near the river course, her dark hair flying loose with the wind. She wheeled the horse to an abrupt halt, and sat listening.

Watching her, Mary's name rose to Chad's lips but stilled to a sudden galloping, echoing now from the direction of Little Creek.

Two horsemen bore down on Mary. She set the piebald forward, as the lead rider cut across her trail. Tom Slater grinned down at her. The Sedgewick City marshal put in at the other side, hemming her in.

"It's what I thought," Mary cried at the marshal. "It's what Phil's been thinking a long time. Shaming the star they gave you. You were that anxious to make Chad Doane right with Phil and Sedgewick City. Phil said it was the quick money, Slater's money, that got to you. You, Chad Doane, and Tom Slater, all together!"

The marshal sat silently.

"There's a fiery little lady for you," Slater shouted. "This time I'm taking her to Little Creek myself, without a fumbling rider to mess it up. Get going back to Sedgewick, and act up to your marshal's star. Put a right smart of space between us before shooting your iron to give the alarm, the way it was supposed to be yesterday. Then innocentlike you can play go-between." Slater's smirk deepened. "Phil Hanly'll give away a dozen paper railroads to get the little lady back. Start riding, Toland."

Chad came over the rise before the dust of the marshal's mount cleared away. He saw the anger in Mary's eyes blaze hotter at sight of him.

"Two thieves, and a Reb," Mary said disdainfully.

Slater shrugged. He looked at Chad, as if his surprise appearance didn't matter. "Getting in a little target shooting for tomorrow, Chad? Was that you fired off the gun? Well, it don't matter none. Seems I'll not be needing you now, Chad. The little lady's going to take care of the railroad bonds, real nice. But I'm not a hard man. Keep the money I've paid you, Chad."

You never got to mentioning the ace in your hand, Slater. Cold-decked it proper for yourself, figuring to let me play the deuce. To shoot it out in Sedgewick City, if your

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kidnap scheme didn't come off. Couldn't afford to trust a Reb." Chad half turned to Mary. "Seems like that's a Yank habit."

"You'll get all of your money-stake," Slater said hastily. "Soon's Little Creek votes the railroad bonds. Drop over to see me. We'll square it right, Chad."

SLOWLY, Chad turned to Mary. The anger was still in her face. A little sadness too, Chad thought. "Ma'am," he said, "where's the rest of the trap you set for me. Where's your brother?"

"No one set a trap for you, Chad Doane. "No one"—she paused—"no one knew exactly why you came to Sedgewick City, not then. I made Phil let me set the trap for the marshal, and you fell into it with him. And a bigger prize, besides." She glanced at Tom Slater.

A single galloping filled the brief silence. Phil Hanly rode up on them, alone.

Slater jumped from his mount, reaching for his weapon.

But Chad's sixgun already lay in his hand. "Time enough for that, Slater," he said. Chad saw fear quickly cloud Mary's face.

Phil Hanly kept his hands on the reins. "Let go your irons, either of you, and that'll be the signal to bring the boys here. They're holding our quick-money marshal back there; and waiting—" Hanly began to dismount. "Waiting until a little something personal between Slater and myself is settled—"

Chad raised his sixgun; stopping Phil Hanly.

"I'm suggesting you stay where you are," Chad said. "There seems to be a little something between Slater and myself, too. And I got here, first."

"Phil, don't trust him!" Mary cried. "He's Tom Slater's man, bought and paid for."

"I took Slater's money; that's so. To stop the voting against his railroad bonds, and for nothing more." Chad looked directly at Mary. Her head was turned away from him "Slater wasn't trusting a Reb. But I mean to keep my bargain if I can. To stop the voting in Sedgewick City, come two days—" Chad looked around at each in turn, and let the grin come slowly to his lips. There were some things even a Reb could learn from a Yank.

"I mean to keep my bargain," Chad repeated. "When I took your money, Slater, you said it was to stop the voting, come *two days*. I mulled it some. And I couldn't see where that held me to stop the voting, if it was to be on the third day, or any day after." Chad saw the smile flit now over Hanly's face. "I mulled a bit more. And it seemed like there might be folks even in Little Creek who'd want to vote against the bonds. I got to thinking, Phil Hanly, you being Sedgewick City's mayor might want it fair and square, all around."

"I'd put it up to the county men," Hanly replied. "Can't see how they'd want it any different. Chad Doane, I'd say you kept your bargain."

"You heard him, Slater," Chad said. "A Reb keeps his bargain—even if he's got to do it slick Yank style. There'll be no voting against the railroad bonds in Sedgewick City, come two days." Chad stood by quietly, waiting.

Slater fixed his eyes on Chad, making no move. "You'll feel the bite of my iron if it wasn't that a shot would bring all of them down on me."

"Seeing's how you got no use for your weapon, drop it to the ground."

Chad walked swiftly up to him, then. And as he did, the money, crumpled the way he'd taken it from Slater, showed in his fist. He sent his fist smashing into Slater's jaw, feeling its flabbiness. Slater's hands went high in the air, and down again as he tumbled backward to the ground. The greenbacks showered over Slater and around him. He lay there, cowering.

Chad glanced over at Mary Hanly. There was no smile on her face.

"We've got no marshal now," Phil Hanly said. "We'd need a marshal to take Tom Slater in to Sedgewick City. We'd need a marshal looking to the day of the new bond voting for a railroad that will be built."

Again, Chad glanced at Mary. And he shook his head. "I'm a Johnny-Reb. Who'd trust a Reb?"

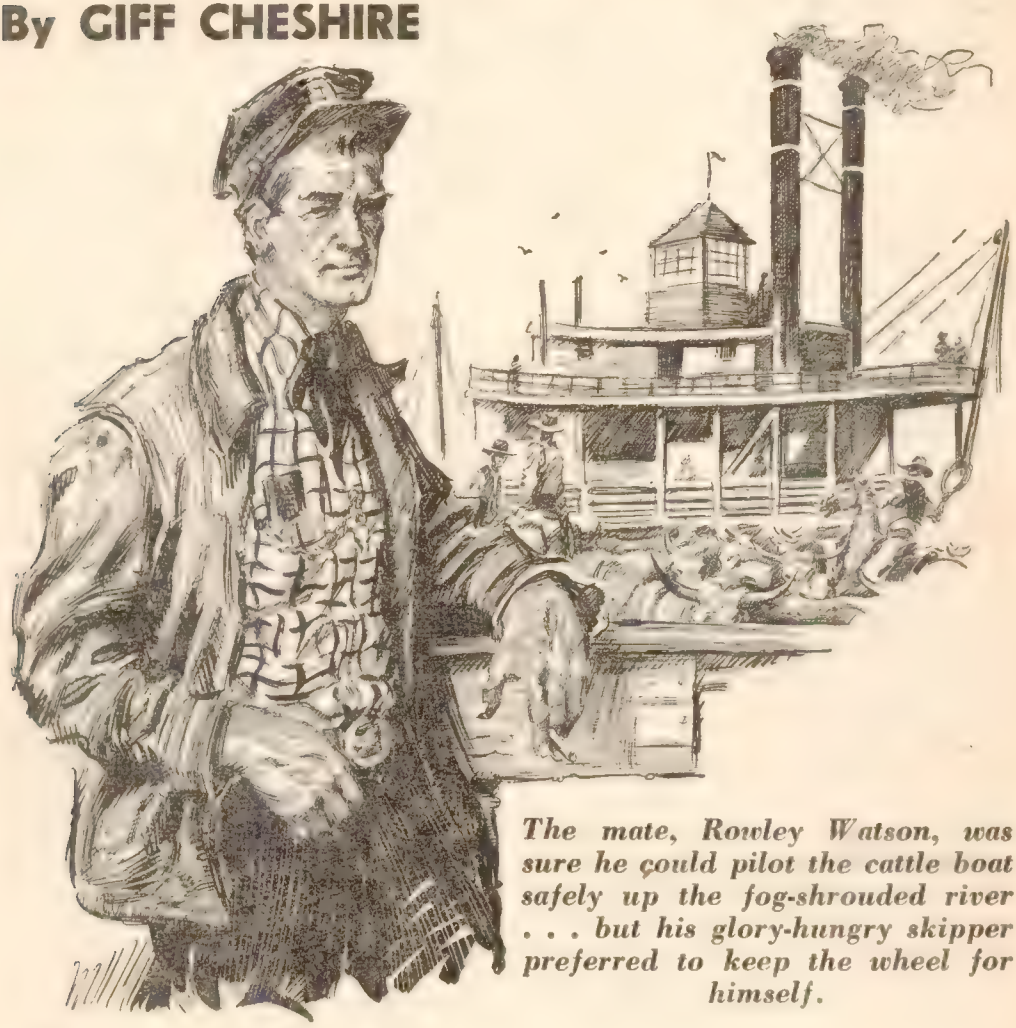
"You're a Reb," Mary said. "Nothing can change that. But what if there was a Yank to side you, Chad Doane? A Yank girl who'd trust a Reb."

Quickly, Chad turned away. "Mount up, Slater," he said. "Mount up, unless you're aiming to walk back to Sedgewick City. Marshal's orders."

Now Chad saw the softness that was in Mary Hanly's lips. ✪ ✪ ✪

RIVER RUCKUS

By GIFF CHESHIRE



The mate, Rowley Watson, was sure he could pilot the cattle boat safely up the fog-shrouded river . . . but his glory-hungry skipper preferred to keep the wheel for himself.

THE cattle had come into town that afternoon. Now, in the pens at the river landing, they were bawling their heads off about it and the congestion of the stock pens and the drenching rain that had fallen without let-up all through that week. Tonight the rain was whipped by a high wind from the east.

Dockside lanterns guttered feebly against the storm. The cattle boat, made fast at the loading-chute, was as fretful as the atmosphere, as the brown water she rode without rest. Up on her texas, Rowley Watson scowled as he surveyed the scene from the pilothouse window. It was a hell of a night for a cattle run.

"Now," said Scotty Yett, the head deckhand, "why do you suppose the Old Man picked a night like this to go to The Cascades?"

"Why," Rowley retorted, "did they pick this kind of night for a beef run?" He was a tall young man, wide through the shoulders. A battered boat cap, shoved to the back of his curly yellow hair, was the only badge of his berth as mate aboard the

Trojan. The *Trudgin' Trojan*, as the crew called her, for she got all the dirty jobs on the middle-reach of the upper Columbia.

"We're both askin' silly questions," Scotty said, settling his slicker collar about his neck, preparing to go out into the weather. "We're making the cattle run at night because the cowpokes used all the day getting 'em here. The owners don't want a feed bill and figure all we got to do is paddle around on this here river day and night. The Old Man's going down because the new *Empress* is ready to go into service. Feel like a little bet?"

Rowley gave him a friendly grin. "Huh-uh. You want to bet Mumford'll go aboard as her new skipper. Which he will."

"And you'll bring the *Trojan* back, a spang-dangle new skipper yourself."

"Could be," Rowley admitted. He yawned widely at the rain-washed window glass. They'd brought up a wood-barge that day, only to receive orders to stand in to the cattle landing and prepare for another down-river run. He was dead beat and knew there were other men aboard as tired.

"A hell of a note," Scotty said with a quick, wicked grin, "when you got to win Guy Mumford a promotion before you can get one yourself."

"Shut up, Scotty," Rowley grunted, and Scotty Yett ducked out.

Rain was like dry ice on the pilothouse roof and glass. The darkened river off Dalles City was lost to Rowley, but he didn't have to be told that it was running chop. The middle-reach, from the rapids here to the rapids at The Cascades, was gorge-locked, winding and unmarked. Fifty scared steers made a nerve-racking load any time.

And Pitt Parminter, who owned the *Trojan* and the new *Empress*, was going down with them. There was nothing vindictive in Rowley Watson, but he grinned slightly to himself. Guy Mumford, the present skipper of the *Trojan* and eager candidate for the new steamboat Parminter had built at The Cascades, didn't like a night run, and liked a storm even less.

By the light of pitch torches, the stock-pen hands were pushing the beef-steak aboard. The steers were nervous, bad-tempered, and crowded on the flush deck, they would make an explosive load. Rowley had seen cattle go berserk and try to start a stampede and pile-up in those restricted quarters. He had never enjoyed such an occasion.

Beyond the stock-pens, Rowley vaguely saw a buggy wheel in from town. That would be the Old Man, Pitt Parminter, who they claimed had resulted from the union of a rhinoceros and a wasp. Rowley knew what Mumford would do with the Old Man. He'd put him in the best cabin and pray that Parminter slept all the way. On a night like this, Mumford would want Rowley to take the wheel, under which circumstances he wouldn't want the Old Man loitering in the pilothouse.

Rowley rolled himself a smoke, frowning at the cigarette though it spun into a perfect cylinder. He lighted up, stepped to the pilothouse door and looked down to see three people coming aboard. Rowley stood there fo. a long moment, the cigarette motionless before his half-open mouth. Guy Mumford was coming along the sidedeck behind two others, one of whom was Pitt Parminter. The other newcomer was responsible for the commotion in Rowley's chest. Parminter had brought along his daughter Matty.

ROWLEY took a drag on his cigarete, aware that they were coming up to the roof. He stepped back into the pilothouse, trying to make himself inconspicuous in the eight-by-eight confines. Matty stepped in first, giving Rowley a quick look of recognition and greeting. She was a slight, dark girl, lost in streaming rain-clothes, but he didn't have to see the slim, rounded body beneath to be aware of it.

Matty said, "Hello, Rowley. If you're trying to get out, why don't you use the door?" She dimpled and her brown eyes were alive with rich vitality. It amused her that Rowley Watson was not strictly at ease with a girl.

Pitt Parminter followed Matty. He gave Rowley a brief, cool nod then grew comfortably unaware of him again. He was a blocky, round-headed man with square jaws and snow-white hair. He was in half a dozen enterprises around Dalles City, one of the few successful independent operators on the Columbia.

Coming in last, Guy Mumford rolled the door shut. "Got that load of beef aboard yet?" he asked Rowley, brusker than usual, putting snap into his voice for the Old Man's benefit. And Matty's, of course.

It was widely assumed that Mumford's promotion to the *Empress* would eventually be followed by a marriage knitting him solidly into the company. Mumford rated it. He had worked for the Old Man longer than Rowley, had no shyness with women, and made a striking figure in his river clothes.

At that moment Scotty Yett rolled the door open and bawled, "She's set. Man, are we loaded. Horns and tails hanging over the rails."

"Then let's paddle," Mumford said.

Rowley flung Matty a startled look. "You getting off?"

"I'm going along."

He batted his eyes, but all at once he knew why she was willing to endure a night-long trip on a stinking cattle boat. She wanted to come back up on the *Empress* on its first trip, the same as the Old Man did. The *Empress* was an elegant packet, designed for the passenger trade. Mumford would fit her, and since she would have a daylight schedule, he would make out all right.

"Well, sir," Mumford said respectfully to the Old Man, "I expect you two would be more comfortable in cabins."

Parminter shook his head vaguely, not commenting. A small frown knit itself between Mumford's dark eyebrows. He looked questioningly at Matty, but she didn't notice or appeared not to. Then Mumford stepped to the wheel and studied the dockside scene. Steam was made. There wasn't anything left but to depart. Mumford hit the whistle treadle, sounding the mournful whistle with which all steamboats set to work. Then he yelled for the lines to come in, and presently belled the engineroom.

Fifteen minutes later, the stalwart *Trojan* was out in the river, slipping quietly westward toward the dark jaws of the great gorge. Out there the wind hit her tail and slashed the rain against the glass of the back windows. Rowley went down to the galley, built a fire in the stove and started a big pot of coffee.

Scotty Yett followed him. "Hope nothing fouls up our promotion," he said.

"Which promotion?" Rowley grunted.

"Yours to skipper and mine to mate of this stinkin' teakettle," Scotty said. "Which depends on us getting Mumford promoted out of our way. He's no night pilot and knows it. And I just hope the Old Man don't find out."

"He won't," Rowley said. "Besides that, it won't matter on the *Empress*. Not much to do on a passenger boat but bow and scrape at the public. Right up Mumford's alley, and that's all the Old Man cares about."

"Mebbe," Scotty said.

The *Trojan* slid down past Crates Point and on around the tricky sand bar at Cayuse Rock. The bowlight disclosed nothing but a barrage of rain, driven forward on the tail wind. Drinking coffee in the galley, Rowley didn't have to be told that the gorge was beginning to swallow them. Scotty Yett went out, and Rowley waited to be called, knowing Mumford would make some excuse for turning the wheel over to him. Man had nothing much beyond river instinct with which to run a steamboat this kind of a night.

The galley door slid open, and Rowley straightened at the table when he saw Matty step in. Wind had tousled her hair under the cute little rain hat. There was rain on her brown cheeks and she looked wonderful.

"Smelled coffee," she said.

"You have a good nose," Rowley said.

"All right," said Matty, "I was able to

deduce where you would be hiding out. Dad says a steamboat's run on coffee as much as steam. And nerve."

"Your dad said that?"

"That's right."

"He kicking about the coffee bill? Or the lack of steam and nerve?" Rowley poured Matty a cup of coffee and set it on the table. He rummaged some canned milk, since he took his own coffee black, and when he turned around she was out of her slicker and seated at the table across from his place. Rowley swallowed. She had on a tailored skirt and tight, knitted blouse.

"He's kicking about nothing," Matty answered.

But apparently Guy Mumford was. Maybe he guessed where Matty had gone, for at that moment the trip gong sounded the first mate's call. Matty frowned slightly. Rowley knew she liked to corner him and get him fussed and tongue-tied and feeling like a helpless idiot. It was a hell of a note because she made him feel wonderful, deep inside, savage and commanding and downright wicked, even. But he simply couldn't translate that into the smooth and pretty stuff Guy Mumford turned out.

"Excuse me," Rowley said, and he rose hastily.

"Maybe there's an island in the way," Matty murmured, and Rowley wondered about that as he climbed up on top.

There was only the binnacle light in the pilothouse now, but Rowley could see Mumford's set face. But Mumford managed to grin.

"Take her a while, Rowley," he said. "I want to have a look at those steers."

Parminter rose off the stool behind Mumford. "I'll go along," he said.

"Coffee in the galley," Rowley said, accepting the wheel. "Matty's down there."

"I thought so," Mumford said, and they went out.

ROWLEY settled to what he knew was going to be as long a wheel watch as Mumford could make it. The gorge was over a mile wide, and the only trick was to stay in navigable water, to anticipate and bypass the numerous towheads and islands without being able to see anything but the jackstaff and a lot of rain.

But there were means of doing every one of those things successfully if a man had mastered the skills. The whistle could tell him how far he was from shore. The rudder told him, through the wheel, what kind of water he was in. An intimate knowledge of the river, plus the binnacle clock, did the rest. That was why the Old Man considered nerve as important as coffee in steamboat operations. A wild or doubting mind could miscalculate, and a miscalculation could be disastrous.

Rowley knew why Mumford had got himself relieved at this point. The gorge was narrowing a trifle, requiring Rowley to sound the cliffs with the deep-throated whistle, now and then. If you wanted to time the echo and do some lightning mental figuring, you could determine the distance accurately. Or you could develop an instinct for judging how far off you stood, the way Rowley knew now that he was still fair in the channel.

The tail wind was rising, shrieking above the *Trojan's* steady chuff. Chop hit her heavily, and mixed in with the racket Rowley could hear a steady nervous complaint from the cattle. He agreed with them that it was not only an undignified but a nerve-racking way to go to the slaughterhouse. If they went haywire they could create a real problem.

Rowley hoped the Old Man would go to bed when he had had his coffee, Matty likewise. Though he didn't talk about it, Rowley wanted Mumford to get his promotion. Automatically, thereafter, he and Scotty Yett would step up a notch on the *Trojan.* Scotty was as good a riverman as either of his superiors, and together they would run a tight packet. Beyond that, Scotty had a wild and reckless will, sometimes. It wouldn't be beyond him to quietly lay out Mumford with a belaying pin to keep him out of the pilothouse until they got the *Trojan* safely to The Cascades.

At Mitchell Point, long later, the waves were washing high. The channel widened a little, though the cliffs stood closer to the water. Man had to know that and allow for it, when he whistled to determine his position. Rowley touched the gong, signaling for Scotty to come up.

"Sounds like those steers're getting seasick," he told Scotty. "Better put the deckhands down there to see they don't bash down the bulkheads on the foredeck. Hell of a night to have to swim after some steers." The lower deck freighthouse served to en-

fold most of the small herd they were transporting. But the rails of the open foredeck were low and had been butttressed by high board fences to keep the more sprightly animals from jumping over.

Scotty nodded and went out again. Mumford didn't come back to the pilothouse, nor did Matty or the Old Man. At first Rowley thought it was lowering storm scud that he began to see wisping in the pale jackstaff light. But it grew thicker and finally he had to accept the additional hazard of river fog. It could be bad in the gorge. Some said there was no use bothering to navigate, once it came in, the mountains being about as easy to tunnel. Presently the forward light seemed to stand beyond a gauze curtain.

When Mumford and the Old Man came up to the pilothouse presently, Rowley could tell by Mumford's face that he hadn't been the one to suggest it. But Mumford was caught in the bight of the line and knew it. With an arrogant swing of the shoulders, he stepped in to take the wheel.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Off White Salmon."

"You sure?" Mumford asked sharply.

"Hell no," Rowley said and let it go at that. He went out, chaffed by the man's daring to doubt his judgment in front of the Old Man. But it was because of the Old Man that Mumford had done it, Rowley knew.

He went down to take a look at the steers. They were bawling, restless, and they stank, but so far appeared an entirely normal load of cattle. Thereafter he climbed to the galley and was surprised to find Matty still there.

"You keep drinking coffee," Rowley said, "and you're going to settle on the bottom."

Matty yawned at him. "I'm not drinking coffee, and I've got a secret. I'm scared, and I feel more at home in a kitchen."

"We dunged out a cabin for you," Rowley told her. "Why don't you sleep through it?"

"A good idea," Matty agreed. "For anybody who could do it."

"Going back up on the *Empress* tomorrow?" he asked.

"That's the idea of my being along. Rowley." Matty eyed him speculatively, knowing, of course, that he was curious about Mumford's promotion. The Old Man was tight-lipped, unpredictable, but seeing that there was a romantic angle involved, probably Matty had found out. If so, she didn't intend to satisfy Rowley's curiosity.

Fog changed the timbre of the whistle and played tricks with its echo. It was going like a banshee now, and Matty really was uneasy. Rowley poured himself coffee, blended it with a cigarette, and wondered if she knew what happened to her hair when lamplight got tangled in it. But he kept listening to that persistent whistle, a sense of foreboding beginning to rise up in himself. Presently he left the table abruptly and stepped out to the side deck.

He couldn't be sure, for once a man let go of the wheel he lost track of the minute things that gave him his bearings and had to be given them afresh when he took the wheel again. But he had a feeling they were too close to the north side. It took an extreme nicety of judgment to tell. Echoes came back from both sides of the river and had to be distinguished. Forested rises softened the echo, a rock cliff sharpened it considerably. Rowley listened closely and had a feeling that if he were at the wheel he would throw it over a spoke or two.

SCOTTY YETT came padding along the sidedeck and stopped at the rail beside Rowley. He said, "I'd feel better if it was you or me up there."

"He'll make out," Rowley said.

"I bet he's got no more idea where we are then we've got," Scotty said worriedly. "All we need to do is shoal up someplace, then nobody's got a promotion. Hell of it is, nobody wants him relieved any more than he does, himself. But how can he let go that wheel so soon, when he's been dodging it all night?"

"Look," Rowley said. "You go down to the engineroom and tell Jake he needs to see Mumford about something down there."

Scotty grunted and swung off. Within minutes the gong sounded the mate's call, and Rowley headed for the texas.

"Got to go below," Mumford said, when Rowley stepped into the wheelhouse. "Jake's got a hot bearing." He sounded like a hot bearing was a windfall.

Rowley took the spokes and made the routine inquiry. "Where we at?"

"Off Pickaxe Rock."

Reflexively Rowley asked the very thing that had irritated him a while ago.

"You sure, Guy?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Mumford snapped. He lost no time in getting out of there.

Rowley didn't blame him. He knew now that nobody had any idea where they were, though he would have bet that they were well below Pickaxe Rock. They were a lost steamboat, and the only sensible thing to do was to slack off right now, drop anchor, and wait for daylight. But Mumford would never stand for that. He had declared loudly, in front of the Old Man, that he knew where they were. Any good pilot, certain on that point, could and would go through on dead reckoning.

"Aren't you swinging us off Mumford's course?" the Old Man asked, noticing what Rowley was doing quietly to the big wheel.

"Dog-leg in here," Rowley said.

"Off Pickaxe Rock?"

Rowley didn't answer that one. Panic was climbing in him, which was of no service whatsoever to a night pilot. He had the whistle going and now was only trying to make certain they were out in the middle of the river. That could be bad business, too, if they were anywhere close to Hog Island.

He was swearing under his breath. If Mumford had a lick of sense he would hop onto that hot bearing fable and develop a real one if he had to build a fire under it. That would give them an excuse to slack weigh and drop anchor. But Mumford wouldn't do a thing as sensible as that. He would bull it through, and if trouble came, now, Rowley Watson had the wheel.

Rowley combed his brain for a way to get Scotty up here while he went down for a private talk with Mumford. He had no better idea than Mumford where they were, but he had a better one where they were not.

"Guess I'll go see what they've got down there," the Old Man said. He started for the door and that was as far as he got on his feet. The *Trojan* lifted her prow, all at once, a tremendous shudder running up through her timbers. Then she leveled off but the Old Man went down hard, driving into the forward bulkhead.

But now Rowley didn't give two hoots about anything but steamboating. He rang down the engine before they climbed up on some island.

In the sudden stillness a deckhand bawled, "Some cows went overboard!"

The Old Man was down flat, unmoving. He had hit his head against the cornerpost of the wheelhouse. But the stack still stood, the big peril in such a situation, and Rowley knew they had only scraped bottom someplace. He yelled through the speaking tube for Mumford and Scotty.

Mumford came in first, his face wild with worry. He took an alarmed look at the Old Man, on the deck.

"You fixed things up fine!" he breathed at Rowley. "You fixed them dandy!"

"Where's a shoal off Pickaxe Rock?" Rowley demanded hotly.

"You found one, didn't you?" Mumford snapped. "Man, get under weigh before we turn sideways!"

"Huh-uh," Rowley said. "We drop anchor and wait for daylight."

Mumford tried to knock him away from the wheel. Rowley had intentions of holding onto it. His mind, minutely familiar with every foot of the middle Columbia, had gone to work again. He had that feeling pilots get, strong enough to render him sure of where they were. Ten to one they had hit the sand bar off Wind River, well below where Mumford had claimed to be. The broadening rises on the north side had made it seem that they had more room in that direction than they actually had.

And if I hadn't swung south we'd really have piled up, Rowley thought.

He'd had enough. He knocked Mumford's hand off the wheel, growling, "We're going to tiptoe till we're sure we're past it." When that didn't work, he swung and drove his fist into Mumford's exposed belly.

Scotty had come in and dropped down beside the Old Man. He yelled, "Good going, Rowley!" Mumford stumbled backward, holding his stomach. Then the Old Man let out a groan and instantly tried to shove himself up.

Satisfied that they were still fairly afloat, Rowley rang the engine slow astern to hold the *Trojan* motionless. If they were where he believed, now beyond the mouth of the Wind, the sidewash had pushed them out into slack enough water to anchor. He told Scotty to drop the anchor, presently felt its line tighten gently, and rang down the engine again.

The Old Man had got to his feet, sputtering. "So you wanted to dog-leg, did you?" he demanded.

"Dog-leg?" Mumford asked.

"He changed your course," the Old Man said. He was rubbing the top of his head.

"Let's have a look at those steers," Rowley said to Scotty.

No harm had come to the forty-five steers still aboard the *Trojan*. Five had gone over the side, taking the wooden fence with them, and there was no use worrying about them now. The Old Man would have a bill to pay as big as the freight on the whole lot. Deckhands already were fixing the break.

In the engineroom Rowley found that the engineer had a bloody nose but everything else was intact. Then he went to the galley, not for coffee, but to see about Matty.

She was asleep with her head on the table, and hadn't even awakened.

Rowley stood there for a long moment looking at her. He was through with Parminter Transportation, of course, since he had slugged a superior and the Old Man already believed he had carelessly or wilfully changed off the right course. But he knew another thing. Mumford wouldn't have the nerve to take the *Trojan* on tonight. He had an excuse to sit here and he'd do it, uneasy as he might be about what daylight would disclose as to their position. Rowley still had a feeling as to what that position would be and was willing to wait for it to be disclosed to convict or vindicate him.

And any other night, Rowley told himself hotly, *Mumford would have let me bring her down and that's all there would have been to it. Another night run over. Money in the till for the Old Man. Everybody happy . . .*

ROWLEY went to his cabin. Scotty came in pretty soon, his eyes smoky. "Mumford's going to hang you to the yardarm!" he exploded. "You wait and see!"

"Who cares?" Rowley asked tiredly. "You'll get the *Trojan*."

"The hell I will. If the Old Man's fool enough to can you, I'll quit!"

"The Old Man's no fool, Scotty," Rowley said. "We aren't anywhere near Pickaxe Rock. And if we're where I think we are, daylight'll show we'd have piled high on something if I hadn't changed course when I did. If so, he might not mind my socking Mumford."

"Where do you think we are?"

"Setting off Wind River. A little below it."

Scotty scratched his jaw and walked out.

The fog, the night, both hugged them tight to their little spot of the river. The rain still hammered down and the wind tried to rip away the superstructure. The plaintive

protest of the cattle was hardest on a man's nerves. And thinking about Matty and how good it had been working for an outfit she was attached to, seeing her frequently, talking to her now and then. If he had been wrong, if he had made a tremendous mistake in judgment, it was going to be hard looking at Matty's eyes.

The door opened finally and Guy Mumford stepped into Rowley's cabin. His eyes were hot, full of menace.

"You don't have to say it," Rowley drawled. "It was all my fault. You're still going to get your promotion."

Mumford kept his voice low. "We've both got a promotion at stake, Rowley. Maybe we better set our ruckus down to excitement. Do you think we dare go on at slow bell?"

Rowley's eyes narrowed. "Daylight's got you scared, has it?"

"There's no sense in either one of us clouding our record if we can help it. Scotty told the Old Man where you figure we are Now that I've had time to think about it, you're probably right." The man was antagonistic to his bones but was trying to sound halfway friendly. "You always had me beat at night, Rowley, and I never claimed otherwise. It'll be a day run on the *Empress* and—" Mumford shrugged.

That was true, Rowley reflected. If they went on, the Old Man would never know for sure whose judgment had been faulty And there was Matty. If it was with her and Mumford the way everyone supposed, Mumford's getting in Dutch with her father would hurt her.

"And I take the blame for that scraping and the steers we lost?" Rowley asked.

"The Old Man'll cool off," Mumford said. "I'll go to bat for you. Anybody can dig a little sand on a night like this."

"And we assume we're where I say?" Rowley asked.

"We are," Mumford said readily. "The Old Man turned in. I'd like to have him wake up at The Cascades."

"Then let's go," Rowley said.

Jake, the engineer, had kept up steam Mumford climbed to the pilothouse with Rowley, and Rowley took the wheel. Scotty showed up instantly, and Mumford told him to bring in the anchor as soon as the line was slacked off. Looking stunned, Scotty flung a questioning look at Rowley, who shrugged. Then he disappeared.

Rowley knew that from a practical standpoint this was foolish, that wisdom counseled their staying put until they could see what they were doing. But it was safe enough to creep forward at slow bell until he could verify their location. Thereafter it would be routine. Within minutes they were once more creeping down through the befogged night . . .

Daylight found them on the last lap before The Cascades. Long before then Rowley knew he had been dead right. Mumford knew it, and Scotty knew it, but the Old Man would never know. Mumford had turned confident again and grown so friendly Rowley wanted to sock him in the belly again. Mumford took the wheel at dawn and a little later stood the cattle boat in at the downriver landing. As soon as the *Trojan* was made fast, Mumford disappeared below.

Rowley met Scotty Yett on the sidedeck, and Scotty said, "It's as well you pulled him out of it. You ain't got brains enough to come in out of the rain."

"Man needs a job, Scotty," Rowley said "Don't you need one?"

"The Old Man'll feel better when his headache goes away." Rowley went on into his own cabin.

There was a rap on his door, which warned Rowley it wasn't one of the crew. Matty stood on the sidedeck when he opened the door She walked right in.

"I've got a crick in my neck," she said. "Did you ever sleep all night on a table?"

"Under a few," Rowley said, grinning.

"You must have got drunk on fog last night," Matty said reflectively.

"So you heard how I dog-legged into a shoal. Who told you?"

"Scotty. Why did you save Guy's bacon for him?"

Rowley stared. "Who said I did?"

"Scotty."

"You believe him?" Rowley asked, astonished.

"Absolutely."

Rowley backed to his bunk and sat down. "How come?"

"That's beside the point. And I happen to have learned that you wouldn't even have been at the wheel, when it happened, if you hadn't been trying to help Guy out then, too." Matty smiled softly. "I hope I know

(Please continue on page 111)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 67)

SO YOU think you know something about cow punchers and the West, eh? Then here's your chance to prove it. Below are listed 20 questions about rangeland subjects. Answer 18 or more of them correctly, and you're top rider material. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're still plenty good. But answer fewer than fifteen and you land smack in with the lenties. Good luck!

1. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "horse pestler," what should you return with?

2. True or false? A "horse man"—according to the terminology of the range—is one who raises horses.

3. When used in reference to horses, what is the meaning of the expression "let the hammer down"?

4. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "line"?

5. What kind of a person is said to have "many wrinkles on his horns"?

6. What is the meaning of the rangeland slang expression "to mother up"?

7. What is the meaning of the Western term, "to outfox"?

8. An "over-bit" is: A type of rattlesnake bite? A brand? An earmark?

9. Under what Western circumstances are you most likely to hear the cry, "Pick him up"?

10. What well known Western game does the term, "piker" come from? Faro? Blackjack? Horseracing?

11. If the ranchboss sent you out for a "Rocky Mountain canary," which one of the following should you return with? A small yellow bird? An old prospector? A burro?

12. Which generally had the better robe—a buffalo killed in the winter or one killed in the summer?

13. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "to rust the boiler"?

14. In the slanguage of the cowpoke, a "sachet kitten" is: The camp cat? A skunk? An oddly-striped wildcat?

15. True or false? A horse is said to "smoke his pipe" if he has a lip which has been torn by a bridle bit.

16. What is the cowpuncher slang meaning of the term, "smoke signal"?

17. If an Indian came up to you muttering the expression "Supaway John," which of the following things should you do? Shoot him? Give him some food? Sound the alarm that an Indian raid was about to take place?

18. True or false? In the slanguage of the cowpoke, a "sunfisher" is simply a horse that sunfishes when he bucks.

19. True or false? The expression "tally branding," means taking an inventory.

20. If you heard that a cowpoke acquaintance of yours had "taken the big jump," what would you know had happened to him?

RUSTLER'S MOON

By A. C. ABBOTT

"I'm telling you once more, I haven't killed anybody—yet."

Cowboy Bill Farraday knew he wasn't the rustler the ranchers were seeking. But the evidence was piling up so fast—that even the girl he loved thought he'd be better off dead!

BILL FARRADAY, a slim young cowboy with a cocky slant to his Stetson, had a pair of blue eyes that could cloud up quicker than a desert sky in the summertime. Right now they were striking lightning all around Dave Simms, the big blond-headed foreman of the Rafter B Ranch. The shades in the ranch house living room had been pulled against the glare of the afternoon sun, but the light was plenty good enough to show Bill the smugly challenging expression on the foreman's face.

"I doubled the guard on the beef herd last night," Dave was saying smoothly. "Didn't know what else to do until you got home, Mr. Baxter, but I figured you'd want to

'know about this. I was right, wasn't I?"

"You bet I want to know about it." Old John Baxter took a quick pull on his cigar and blew the smoke out his nose looking, as he swung toward Bill, like a bull about to charge. "What were you doing down there in the brakes, Farraday?"

"Ridin'," Bill said shortly.

"What for? Why weren't you on circle like you were supposed to be? Or had you forgotten that we're trying to hold a beef roundup?"

"He hadn't forgotten," Dave put in coolly. "In fact, I got a hunch he had the beef herd in mind when he went down there."

Bill clamped his jaw against the blistering retort that rose to his lips. He had gone down into the cedar brakes lying below the rim on the trail of one Mr. David Simms, of whom he had been suspicious for some time. He had lost the trail, and he hadn't thought that Dave had seen him; but evidently he had been wrong about that. Now Dave, with infuriating cleverness, had made his accusation first. If Bill tried to explain, he would sound like a little kid saying, "I don't like you, either."

"Well?" Baxter snapped. "Speak up, Farraday. We know that somebody around here has been spotting the choice herds and letting those cow thieves down in the brakes know when to strike. If you're not the man, you'd better be saying so!"

Bill flicked a harried glance at Jonette Baxter, standing silently near the door. Her brown eyes, he noted, were as serious as they could get, which never seemed to be to serious because of the impudent tilt of her freckled nose.

"I'm not the man," he said.

"Then what were you doing in the brakes?"

"Ridin'."

Baxter bounced out of his chair with surprising agility for a man of his age. He grabbed the cigar out of his mouth and jabbed it at Bill, his bobbing gray mustache adding extra emphasis. "If that's the best answer you've got, you're fired!"

"Wrong," Bill said. "I quit. I've been punchin' your cows for five years; but if you're bull-headed enough to believe the first shady remark that's made about me, you can punch your own cows!"

"Listen, young man—"

"You get your arrangements all made out at the railroad, for the cattle cars?"

"Certainly. They'll be there the fifteenth."

"Ahuh." Bill jerked his hat down a little farther over his right eye. "Well, I hope you have the beef to load on 'em. You're too dumb to be dishonest, but I can't say as much for all the men you hire."

He turned away from Baxter before that red-faced individual could get his mouth closed, spent three seconds critically examining Dave Simms' handsome face, then wheeled toward the door. Opposite Johnny Baxter he stopped, sweeping a glance over her from her curly brown hair down past the plaid shirt and trim levis to the neat, spurred boots—and back again. He turned his head toward Baxter.

"Another thing, you old goat," he said evenly. "I happen to be in love with your daughter, and I'm going to marry her." He grabbed the girl abruptly around the waist, bent his head for a swift kiss that made her gasp, and added grimly, "if I live long enough."

Then he stalked out of the house, slamming the door on Baxter's outraged profanity and using a little of his own on Dave Simms. The man had been too smart for him. Bill had intended to keep his suspicions to himself until he could prove them. Now anything he might say had been discredited before he could say it.

HE SWUNG onto the company horse he had been riding at the time he was summoned and loped out to the horse pasture, a green, well-watered meadow ringed by towering pines. He ran the horses into the corral, cut out his private saddler and was shifting his saddle to the bay when an imperious little hand grabbed his sleeve.

"You listen to me, William *Le*-roy Farraday!" Jonny's eyes were no longer merely serious. They appeared to be on fire. "What was the idea—"

Bill interrupted her with a grin. "Didn't you like that kiss?"

"That's beside the point! What was the idea of saying you were going to marry me?"

"'Cause I am. Didn't you know?"

"Aren't you even going to ask me?" she demanded.

"Oh, yeah. When the right time rolls around."

"Well, that wasn't the right time to decide to kiss me after waiting five years to do it!

I think Dad is about to bite himself."

"Don't you let him," Bill said seriously. "The old knuckle-head might poison himself."

"You can't blame Dad for feeling that way," she protested. "Why didn't you say something, Bill? You're no cow thief."

"Thanks," Bill said.

Jonny's sucking breath indicated exasperation. "Why didn't you explain, Bill? What *were* you doing down in the brakes?"

Bill turned to his horse and jerked the cinch up so suddenly the animal grunted. "My old dad told me one time," he said grimly, "that the best way for a man to defend himself was to hit the other feller first. I'm commencin' to see what he was talking about."

"What do you mean by that?"

Bill tied off the latigo, then leaned one arm across the saddle and squinted down at her speculatively, wondering where to begin. At that moment he saw Dave Simms round the corner of the log bunkhouse and come on with a slow, deliberate stride. Then man looked forbiddingly capable, with a gunbelt sagging around his waist and his shoulders bunching wide under his blue checked shirt.

Bill shrugged. "Just thinking out loud."

"Bill." Jonny's long lashes made shadows across her eyes as she looked up. "What did you mean about—if you lived long enough?"

"These ranchers have had enough of that spotter, Jonny. If they decide I'm the huckleberry they'll set me up for target practice."

"Well, golly," she blurted. "Do something!"

"Yeah," Dave cut in coldly, and Jonny whirled with a gasp. "Get off the ranch for one thing. You're canned, cowboy!"

Dave's greenish-gray eyes always looked like a roily river, and now they looked as if it had been raining hard somewhere up country. Evidently old John Baxter wasn't the only one who was about to bite himself over that kiss Jonny had collected. Bill grinned at the thought.

"Well?" Dave snapped, his hand dropping to his gun.

Bill's own gun was in his blanket roll in the bunkhouse, but caution was something to be used by other people at other times.

"Yeah," he drawled coolly. "Well, well!" Then he struck, lashing out with a trip hammer one-two-three that caught the bigger man flat-footed. Dave got the gun out; but it seemed to be very heavy and, besides, by that time his eyes were crossed. Bill wrenched it out of his hand, then stepped back for a full-arm right that spun Dave around and dropped him to his hands and knees, heading back toward the house.

Bill picked up the bay's reins, took Jonny's elbow and propelled her, still open-mouthed, to the door of the bunkhouse. He left her there while he went in to gather up his few belongings, tossing Dave's gun onto the cluttered table and strapping his own gunbelt around his waist.

When he emerged, he noticed that Jonny's thoughtful gaze was fastened on Dave, who was staggering toward the horse trough. Bill tied the blanket roll quickly behind his saddle, then turned to fold his arms around Jonny before she could make up her mind just what she thought of this.

"Bye, darlin'," he said cheerfully. He kissed her, forcing himself to cut it short when he wanted to hang onto her the rest of the day. "I'll let you know the date of the wedding."

Without giving her a chance to reply, he vaulted into his saddle and spurred out of the ranch yard.

It was mid-afternoon when he arrived in town, a collection of unpainted buildings that had been scattered hit or miss among the pines. He jogged directly to the squat log building the sheriff's office, finding the officer perched on the top pole of the corral out back, admiring a sorrel horse he had just purchased

The sheriff twisted for a squint-eyed look at his visitor, then said gruffly, "Pile off that crowbait and come look at a piece of horseflesh."

Bill joined the gray-haired, big-bodied lawman on the top pole but turned his attention to the rolling of a cigarette rather than to the horse. "What do you know for sure, Nailor?" he inquired experimentally.

"Nothin'," Nailor replied, "except that I see trouble stickin' out on you like warts on a frog. What's the old man rantin' about now?"

"Me." Bill lit his cigarette, feeling the sharp stab of the sheriff's glance. "He canned me awhile ago."

"Canned you?" What for?"

"Dave led him to believe I'm the joker that's been spottin' these herds for the rustlers."

"Oh, yeah?" Nailor's seemed face turned very grave, also very carefully noncommittal. "Are you?"

"What do you think?"

Nailor shook his head, then spat reflectively. "I've know you a long time, Bill. I'd have to catch you stealin' before I'd believe it, and then I wouldn't believe it if you said you hadn't done it."

"Thanks, Chet. And I'm saying right now that I haven't done it." Briefly, then, Bill explained what had happened, not holding back any of his suspicions but freely admitting that he had nothing but a hunch on which to base them. "Just the same," he finished, "Dave knows why I was trailin' him, and he beat me to the punch. The only way he can keep himself in the clear now is to make me out a rustler."

"Ye-e-ah. And that's one punch you better beat him to. What you got in mind?"

Bill pulled in a deep breath and then grinned, clamping an affectionate hand over the sheriff's shoulder. "Doggone, Chet. I knew you'd feel this way about it, but it's sure good to hear you say it."

"Shucks, Bill. Only thing you've ever been guilty of is having a temper with a mighty short fuse, and that bull-headed John Baxter ought to know that by now."

"He's worried," Bill said. "Got a big beef herd gathered and a corral full of weaner calves out there. You can't blame him for not wanting to take chances."

"I can blame him for not using any sense! What did Jonny think about it?"

"She didn't say."

"Well, you can bet she's gonna do a lot of thinkin' 'fore *she* goes off the deep end. You headin' for the brakes?"

"Yeah. I've got to get the proof; but the heck of it is if I hang around down here now, most folks'll figure that just proves what Dave claims."

"Unless you're wearin' a badge." The sheriff grinned at Bill's startled glance. "I've been wanting a good deputy for a right smart while. Bill, I've worn out three, four good horses down there in the last six months and I can't find a dang thing."

"I'll find 'em," Bill said grimly, "if it takes six years."

"Come on in the office and we'll make this legal."

They swung off the fence and turned toward the office, the sheriff striding on as Bill paused to drop his cigarette and step on it. He had just started to step out again when he heard the bullet strike. He saw the sheriff's back arch, saw the splotch of blood that jumped out on his shirt between the shoulders. Then Nailor was falling and Bill was whirling toward the crash of the shot, dragging furiously at his gun.

He caught a flash of movement at the corner of a shed set well back in the brush, and he slammed one shot at it before it disappeared. Then a gasping breath from Nailor jerked him around. He pulled the old sheriff over onto his back, but one glance told him there was nothing he could do. Nailor didn't even know him.

The sheriff was dead by the time first of running townsmen arrived. Bill hardly heard their excited questions, staring down at Nailor's face and struggling against the tight knot that gripped his throat. As Chet Nailor had said, they had known each other a long time.

BILL was vaguely aware that a horse galloped up, came to a sliding halt. Then the cold voice of Dave Simms cut through his shock.

"I guess the sheriff was onto him, too!"

Bill looked up, dazedly noting the strained faces of business men before finding Dave. The Rafter B foreman sat a blowing horse at the edge of the crowd, his face looking bleak and set above the denim jumper he wore.

"I was coming in to get Nailor," Dave said harshly, "but looks like Bill got to him first. I guess he knew we'd be swearing out a warrant for him."

"Warrant?" Bill pushed to his feet, striving to clear his stunned brain. "What for?"

You ought to know, since you helped steal those weaners last night. We got the report of the raid just after you left the ranch. Now you've added murder to it!"

"Wait," Bill said, involuntarily lifting the hand that still held his gun. "I never stole any weaners, and I didn't kill Nailor. That shot—"

"Take a loook at his gun," Dave snapped. "There were two shots fired, and it's a cinch the sheriff didn't fire either of them."

Someone—the town blacksmith—stepped forward hesitantly. "Better hand it over Farraday."

Bill's thoughts suddenly cleared, and sick-

ness spread through him like poison. There would be two empty shells in his gun since he always carried an empty under the hammer. Unless he could get these men to listen, that gun would hang him.

"Wait," he said again. "That shot came from behind that shed over yonder. I fired once at the killer—"

"And missed, of course," Dave put in sarcastically. "Listen, you men. Baxter fired this ranny this morning because he couldn't explain what he was doing down in the brakes yesterday. It's obvious now what he was doing—telling his men to pick up those calves! Nailor must have jumped him about it."

"You're lyin'!" Bill burst out.

"Take his gun, Milton."

The blacksmith stretched out his hand. "Better hand it over."

For the first time Bill really looked at the men confronting him, and he saw the hard hostility stamped on their faces. As far as they were concerned, he was guilty as charged. Abruptly he snapped his gun to a level with Milton's belt buckle.

"Back up," he ordered flatly. "I'm telling you once more, I haven't killed anybody—yet."

"Then prove it," Dave challenged.

"I hope to," Bill said, "but it's kind of hard to prove anything when you're danglin' from a rope. Now just stand hitched, you gents, while I bid you a fond farewell."

His words reflected the reckless anger that had flared up in him. He knew with frustrated certainty that Dave Simms had outsmarted him again, but again his tongue was tied. Slowly he backed to his horse, gathered up the reins and swung into the saddle without losing the drop.

He pulled the horse back, step by step, toward the fringe of protective brush, his hands as cold as ice. He could tell from the rigid forms and bitter faces before him that, to these men, flight proved his guilt beyond a doubt. But it was the gloating light in Dave's eyes that stayed with him as he swung his horse and rammed in the spurs.

A gun blasted behind him, then another. Bill was riding low over his saddle horn and dodging like a jackrabbit, and he was almost out of range when a lucky, glancing shot caught him. The flattened lead tore into his left arm with such force that he nearly went overboard. He heard the fierce yell that went up as he grabbed for the saddle horn. Then the horse was running wild, the reins loose on his neck, while Bill fought a blind dizziness that threatened to sweep him out of the saddle.

A mile from town he pulled up on the bank of a swift running creek gambling with the few minutes it would take the townsmen to get mounted and started on his trail. His arm, he found, was not broken; but the jagged wound was pouring blood. Bill dipped his scarf into the icy water of the creek and bound it swiftly over the hole. Then he remounted, put his horse into the cheek and, without hesitation, turned downstream, deliberately riding away from the jumbled brakes in which any fugitive could lose himself.

Bill Farraday wasn't interested in losing himself. He wanted to find someone—and he knew who that someone was. All he lacked was the proof.

Evidently, he thought sardonically, his declaration of intentions toward Jonny Baxter had forced Dave to change his plans. Where before the man would have been content to continue his rustling and let Bill take the blame for it, now he would gladly forego further profits in order to get rid of Bill altogether. A murder frameup, Bill had to admit, was an excellent way to do it.

He held his horse in the water for two miles before climbing out on a gravelly bank that would leave no tracks. For yet another mile he rode with extreme caution, using every means he knew to kill his trail. Then, confident that he had succeeded, he turned toward town.

Darkness was rapidly closing in by the time he dismounted in dense brush behind the sheriff's office and made his way on foot to the spot where the killer had stood. He found a faint smudge of boot prints that told little and proved nothing—and petered out within ten yards. For several minutes Bill circled the area, his eyes on the ground, trying desperately to pick up the trail the man had left in his getaway.

Finally he gave it up, leaning back against the building and bleakly admitting to himself that the proof he sought just wasn't here. It was then he saw the dark red stain on the brush crowding against the rear of the shed.

For a moment Bill stared at it dully, slow to grasp its significance. Then the bottom seemed to drop out of his world. That hasty bullet he had slammed at the killer had found

a target, but it was not the target Bill had expected. Dave Simms had not been wounded.

One more Bill went over the ground, this time watching both tracks and brush; but again he had to give it up. The murderer had made a clean getaway, leaving nothing except a daub of blood which no one would accept as evidence, particularly since Bill had returned and could have put it there himself.

Thoroughly disheartened, Bill stumbled back toward his horse, fully realizing for the first time how sick he was getting. His arm throbbed maddeningly, and a slow but steady bleeding was draining his strength. He needed to have that arm properly dressed. He needed food and a fresh horse—and he needed to see Jonny Baxter.

THE moon was rising, full and blood red, as Gil paused at the edge of the timber to scan the ranch layout. The bunkhouse was dark and silent, but a light showed in the kitchen of the main house.

Jonny sat at the table under the hanging lamp, her chin in her hands, her eyes fixed blankly on the cupboard opposite her. A half-filled plate of food was before her, and it was the only plate on the table.

Thus reassured, Bill fumbled for the door and stepped into the room. He saw the wave of shockcross Jonny's face, but his first consideration was to turn laboriously and pull the door closed behind him. When he faced around again, Jonny was standing against the far wall with a rifle in her hands. Bill started to lift a hand in protest, then sagged back against the door and just stared at her.

"Bill," she said, her voice squeaking, "what have you done?"

Bill shrugged with weary resignation. "Nailor got nailed."

"And you were holding the hammer!"

"Dave told you that, huh?"

"Certainly. He came back out here right after it happened, then went out to get the men to help hunt you for. Bill, why did you do a thing like that?"

"I didn't," Bill said, and a faint resentment stirred through him. He should have known that Dave would smear him thoroughly with this girl, but he had been too sick to think about it. As he thought of it now, part of his old certainty about Dave's motives returned. "Did Dave pull all the men off the beef herd?"

"I think so."

"Ahuh! Then the cattle will be gone by morning."

"How do you know that? Have you been down in the brakes?"

"No, but I'll gamble Dave has. Listen, Jonny, I was trailin' *him* yesterday when I went down there. I've thought for a long time he was the fellow who's double-crossing us, and now— Doesn't it strike you funny

DEATH WATCH at BITTER SPRINGS

Punch-Packed Saga of the Southwest

By Walt Coburn

Hard as his name was Rock Tucker, Arizona ranger—and tougher than the thirty-five miles of scorching desert he'd crossed to keep a tryst with a dead man . . . and the back-shooting border scum who'd murdered him!

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that last night he'd double the guard on the beef herd—so he could hit the weaners—but tonight, with me still runnin' loose, he pulls every man off? He wants them all down there combin' the brakes for me so he can lift those steers!"

"But, Bill, they figured if they you—"

"Oh, sure," he said bitterly. "This'll be their last rustlin' raid 'cause they'll be losing their prize goat. Dave's the man who's been spotting these herds, all right, but it looks like I'm stuck for killin' Nailor."

"Dave said there wasn't any doubt about it. You were afraid to show them your gun, and you ran—"

"Listen, Jonny." Bill had been too tired to think clearly, but he realized now with sudden desperation how important it was for Jonny to believe him. "You know I always carry an empty under my hammer. I fired just once, at the man who killed Chet. Hit him, too. There's blood on the brush."

"Dave wasn't wounded," she said, as if that contradicted his statement.

"I know he wasn't. I don't know who killed Nailor but I do know that I didn't. Chet was a friend of mine!" Bill broke off, watching her intently, ignoring the rifle that she still held pointed at him. "Can't you believe me, Jonny?"

She pulled in a slow breath, frowning at him in uncertainty. "I don't know," she said.

"Well—" Bill let himself go against the door again. "Shoot if you want to, but—"

"But what?"

He tried to grin, but it cost him more than it was worth. "I'd still like to marry you, and it'd be kinda difficult if I was dead."

"Bill," she said, her eyes suddenly popping wide, "you're just plain sick!"

"Gettin' that way," he admitted. "Been a kind of a long day this afternoon, but I don't guess it matters. The first man I meet is going to cure me."

"Oh, Bill!" She shuddered, then spoke with an effort. "Dave said they hit you. I've been so scared all evening, not knowing what was going to happen. Then when you walked in—"

"Yeah," Bill said, wondering about something. "Dave wants to marry you, too."

"I don't like Dave much."

"Do you like me?"

"Oh, you blockhead!"

Bill could see, then, the tears glistening in her eyes; and he had the answer to his question. Dave had seen to it that she would have a suspicious fear of him, but even Dave's lies could not obliterate her instinctive fear *for* him.

He started forward. "Listen, honey—"

The sharp lifting of her hand stopped him. Then he heard it, too—horses approaching the door. Jonny's face turned white.

"Oh, golly," she gasped. She flashed a wild glance around the room. Then, as Bill started toward the darkened living room, she jumped forward to grab his arm. "Hurry!"

Bill staggered under the sharp pull she gave him, but he could not restrain a grin. Jonny Baxter was his girl, all right.

"They're probably just after fresh horses and grub," she whispered. "You can hide in my room 'til they're gone."

They had barely gained the sheltering darkness of the living room when the kitchen door opened and John Baxter stepped into the room. Bill had a glimpse of white cloth behind him, saw Dave's dark face. Then his view was cut off as Jonny pulled him deeper into the room, her hand ice cold on his arm.

Bill took three more steps and stopped short, staring wide-eyed into the darkness.

"It *is* Dave!" he breathed.

Jonny caught her breath. "Are you sure? Can you prove it, Bill?"

He'll do the provin'. He's so damn smart he outdid himself!"

Quickly he drew his gun and checked the loads in it while Jonny tightened her grip on his arm.

"Oh, Bill," she whispered. "Supposing there's some mistake?"

"In that case, I hope you like men with long necks 'cause I'll sure get mine stretched!" He leaned to give her an impulsive kiss, which landed on the end of the nose. "You stay here."

THEN he turned and strode silently back to the doorway, gun in hand. He paused only long enough to place the men—Baxter sitting at the table, Dave still standing, putting his cup down. Bill lifted the gun and stepped into view.

"Howdy, gentlemen," he drawled.

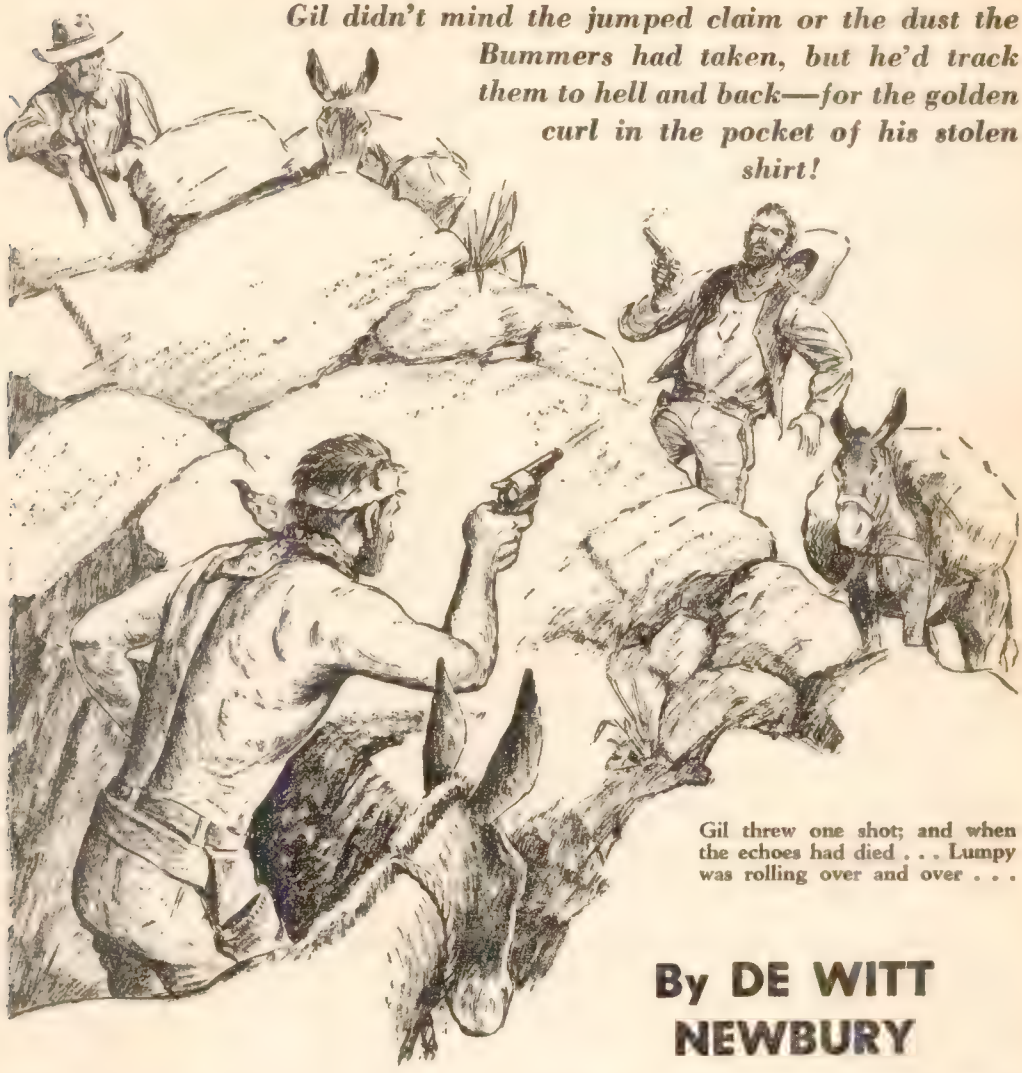
Dave whirled, a hand darting toward his gun but stopping in mid air. Baxter jerked his head up, his eyes instantly glinting.

"Well?" he snapped.

(Please continue on page 112)

DRYGULCH MINER

Gil didn't mind the jumped claim or the dust the Bummers had taken, but he'd track them to hell and back—for the golden curl in the pocket of his stolen shirt!



Gil threw one shot; and when the echoes had died . . . Lumpy was rolling over and over . . .

By DE WITT NEWBURY

THE meeting was by merest chance. Gil Gorman had come down to Denver City for supplies. He'd gone prospecting early that spring, after the hard winter of '59. Now he was back again, a long, raw-boned fellow with a red beard.

He noticed some changes. Jack Smith had built a bigger scow for his ferry over the South Platte; you could take your mule aboard instead of towing him behind. And the town had sprouted two new streets, lined with tents and shacks.

Gil bought his stuff at Wootton's store, paying with gold dust. But the old Indian trader advised him not to bed there. His jack would be stolen out of the pole shed, unless he watched with both eyes and a gun.

So Gil led his little Jerry mule across the rickety bridge that straddled Cherry Creek, then swung west to Blake Street. The Elephant Corral had a tight log stable.

Night was coming and the town was waking up. Men tramped the dusty street, lounged in groups, lurched into the saloons. A rough, hairy-faced lot. Miners, gamblers and rapscallions.

Light began to glow from open windows and doorways. Every other shack was a whisky hell. The street emptied as they filled with customers. Filled with noise, too —boozy whoops, loud talk and laughter, fiddling and singing.

Things were livelier than they'd been last winter, Gil thought as he led Jery into the stable yard.

The stableman, Dinny Sloan, had two belted pistols and a shotgun handy. He lifted his lantern and said, "Howdy, boy! Filled your poke a'ready?"

"Not quite," Gil grinned. "Give the critter a feed, will ye? And keep the pack safe."

Dinny squirted tobacco juice through stained mustaches. "Safer'n you'll be in the Elephant."

"Needn't worry!" Gil edged out of the pole gate. He wasn't looking for fun; he'd just hire a bunk in one of those little canvas-walled back rooms.

He turned toward the hotel door, bright with smoky light. A man was just ahead of him, a stocky, square-shouldered figure outlined against the glow. At the moment there was nobody else in sight.

And then, without a sound, another figure slid out of the dark. This one was ragged, limber and cat-quick. It seemed to blend with the first.

A knifer at work! The ragged man had thrown a strangling arm around the square man's throat, from behind. His right arm was drawn back and there was a flash of steel.

Gil came out of the shadows, too, with one long jump. He had no time to pull his cap-and-ball revolver. Grabbing the knife-arm with one hand, a fistful of greasy hair with the other, he heaved and twisted. Yanked the stabber off his victim and gave him a toss.

He thudded down in a heap of tattered buckskin. Cat-like, he bounced to his feet again; only to pitch forward and lie with face in the dust.

A pistol had exploded at Gil's elbow, with a streak of fire and a whiff of smoke.

The square man was standing wide-legged, juggling a big Colt forty-four. "Sorry I did that," he said, "and him with only a knife. My gun went off by itself, nat'ral like!"

"Don't fret," Gil told him. "The knife was just to work quick and quiet. You'll do to take along, stranger! Watch your back at night, though. Them knifers are after any galoot that might have something in his poke."

In the light from the doorway he saw a blocky, good-natured face above those square shoulders. Shrewd eyes, a stiff brown beard.

A few men had come out of the Elephant to investigate the shot, a few more drifted from up and down the street. They turned the dead man over in the light.

"It's Stinger," one said, " 'Bout time he got his gravy."

Another swore. "By hell, he'd oughta have some stuff on him! Lotta pilgrims been found with leaks in 'em. I bet his sticker would fit some o' them holes!"

A third turned to Gil and the stranger, showing a bristly, projecting chin with undershot teeth. "Your meat, gents. Mind if we frisk him?" But already a dozen hands were going through the ragged buckskins.

The stranger spat disgustedly. "What'll we do with the corpus?"

"Let him lay," Gil answered.

"Ain't there no law?"

"Sheriff wouldn't turn out for less'n a hoss-stealin'," Gil explained. "No, McGovern will be around with his wagon. He's the undertaker. Runs a graveyard up river, and the town—the saloonkeepers, that is—pays him to clean up. Reckon you're new here?"

"Reckon son. Name's Trubee, Alexander James. Come have a drink!"

THEY pushed into the Elephant Corral. The long, log-walled room was crowded, the air thick with tobacco smoke and whisky reek. Rough voices clamored, gamblers sang their patter. The three musicians fiddled and tooted inside their waist-high box of sheet-iron. This was to dodge behind when bullets flew.

Elbowing to a corner of the bar, Trubee called for a bottle.

Gil bored in beside him. "You may be a pilgrim," he said, "but you're no greenhorn. I spotted ye by that flat hat. You're a Self Riser, like me."

"Self Riser?" Trubee cocked an eyebrow.

"That's what they call us Californy boys," Gil grinned. "Fellows from back East found these diggin's, and they say we claim to know it all about prospectin'. Puff ourselves up like saleratus bread. Well, there's little no-account animals in the hills here that smell mighty powerful; so we call all

them Easterners the Pike's Peak Skunks."

Trubee laughed. "Seems ye don't care much for each other."

"There's another gang we both hate worse. Stinger, that you just nailed, was one of 'em. They're the Bummers."

They drank, and Trubee said, "You're right; I made a stake in Californy. But then I tried the lumber business in St. Louis. Had a pardner that plumb ruined me, so I nigh ruined him—with a stockwhip—and cleared out. Had cash enough for a mule team."

Gil thrust out a hand. "Shake! I got to St. Louis, like you, only I craved a steamboat ride, and I'd heard that New Orleans was a high old town." He shrugged. "It was. Didn't need a pardner to ruin me!"

They shook hands. "I've got a better one now," Trubee said.

An idea had popped into Gil's head. He liked this square-made fellow; had a notion he was square all through. An old California hand, too.

He glanced around. They were in a crowd, but nobody was paying them any attention, and there was noise enough to cover close talk. "You say ye've got two jacks," he asked, "and a true-blue pardner?"

Trubee's eyes twinkled. "Truest-bluest that ever was!"

"Then listen! Don't go prospectin' all over the country. Sell your wagon, pack your mules and trail up to my diggin's. I've got a gulch all to myself. But three can hold it better'n one.

"Tell ye how to get there. Follow up Clear Creek and take the North Fork. Don't stop at Gregory Gulch—that's full up. Go on to Poverty, a branch from the west. Climb it to a little creek from the north.

"That's Bobtail. George Jackson named it; he tried the upper end, found no color and quit. But I tried the lower end—and the stuff is there."

Gil had been leaning to talk in Trubee's ear. Suddenly he swung right. Somebody was squeezing in to the bar there, squeezing too close. He looked into a bristly, long-chinned face.

"'Scuse me, gents," the newcomer grinned. "Just reachin' fer a drink." He was the one who had spoken of frisking the dead Bummer.

"All right, Jimber," Gil growled. "Don't overdo it."

The man backed away, holding a thick tumbler of whisky. "That's Jimberjaw Heil, blast him!" Gil muttered. "Bad as Stinger. Reckon he heard?"

"Maybe not," Trubee hoped. "Say, my outfit's in the cottonwoods down river. Why not camp with us tonight, get acquainted? You'll meet my pardner—and be a mite surprised."

That was putting it mildly. Gil was a lot surprised . . . .

Tramping a rutted trail, they passed wagon camps and a few Arapahoe tepees. Then firelight flickered amongst the riverside trees, and they turned toward it. Gil saw a light emigrant wagon. He heard hobbled animals stamping and cropping somewhere near.

But that wasn't all. He saw the gleam of a gun-barrel, and heard a voice calling. A girl's voice!

"Oh, it's you, Alec! You've been gone so long."

Gil could hardly believe his ears. Why, there were no white women in that country yet!

He had to believe, though. Next moment the girl stepped into the firelight. A little thing with bonnet hanging back by its strings, and a rifle under her arm.

"Now, Amy," Trubee was saying, "I just went to scout around."

"Your wife? " Gil whispered, awe-struck.

"My daughter," Trubee chuckled, "though she ain't respectful. Looky here, Amy! I brung a third pardner—if you like his looks."

The girl stared up at Gil, unwinking. "How can I tell," she asked, through all that beard?"

"He's got more'n whiskers to recommend him," her father protested. "Got a location for us. Did me a good turn, too."

"Well," she said tartly, "he needn't stand on one foot that way. He might fall over."

Gil shifted to the other foot. He looked down on clustered curls, bright gold in the firelight. On a pert, freckle-nosed face with a determined mouth. His own mouth opened, but not a word came out.

Amy turned away to the wagon. "I'll throw out a blanket. Maybe by tomorrow he'll have his voice back."

He found his tongue then. " 'Tain't good to leave critters or womenfolks alone. No miners' law here—not yet—and women are scarcer than jacks."

"Californy was diff'rent," Alec Trubee

said uneasily. "But my girl is a warrior, learned on the trail. She was in school in St. Louis until I lost my pile. Then she come a-flyin', to see I didn't lose any more."

"Here comes the blanket a-flyin'," Gil said. "So I'll roll up."

THEY talked things over next morning, while eating a breakfast of biscuits and antelope steaks. A woman's cooking was certainly cheering, as Gil declared.

"You've got a voice, after all," the girl smiled.

He tried to do better. "Your dad says you're the truest-bluest sort, Miss Trubee. Guess he's right—'especially about your eyes."

"That's enough!" She slapped down a tin plate. "He's Alec, I'm Amy. you're Gil. We're all true-blue partners, and no foolishness!"

As a result of the partnership, Gil didn't hurry back to his location. He'd wait for the others, he decided. Three mules could pack quite an outfit, and they'd take the trail together.

There were things to be done. Gil moved his stuff up and turned Jerry loose in the cottonwoods. The little jack didn't need hobbles; he never roamed far from his master's camp.

Then everybody worked. Selling the wagon, making a tent of the wagon-cover, putting two pack-saddles together out of forked wood. It was several days before they could move out.

Gil was scandalized when he saw Amy dressed for the trail. "My Godfrey!" he gasped. "A lady don't wear britches!"

"I'm a lady," she defied him, "and I'm wearing 'em!"

She was. Blue jeans tucked into boy-size boots, and a flannel shirt tucked into the jeans. They fitted well enough; her body hadn't begun to fill out.

Her father spoke up. "It'll be better, in the gulches, if nobody ever spots her for a girl."

"She's too damn' pretty for a boy!" Gil snorted.

Any fetched her scissors and hand-mirror. While the men watched helplessly, she cut off her golden curls and threw them away. Then she took a bit of charcoal from the fire and dabbed her face.

"And now," Alec nodded, "ye look like the skinniest, grubbiest devil of a lad that ever needed lickin'!"

She grinned impishly, sticking out her red tongue. Gil waited his chance. Then—unseen, he thought—he picked up one of the discarded curls and stowed it in a shirt pocket. . . .

Days later they were struggling up a steep ravine, each leading a mule. The mules were loaded with tent, blankets and food, picks, shovels and gold-pans.

The main trail had been well marked and traveled. They had met many placer miners, some busily digging and panning, some hunting for color. All cursing their luck. The Gregory Gulch diggings were playing out, they said.

Not one had seen anything in Amy but a wiry, dirty-faced boy. And Gil was continually astonished at her endurance. She was light and sure-footed, handy with a jack. Never too tired to cook supper. She even cooked like a boy, squatting on her heels by the fire.

Gil looked at her often, remembering the bonneted Curlylocks he had seen by firelight. Then he would put a finger in his shirt pocket and stroke the silky treasure hidden there. . . .

Up near Poverty Gulch they met a prospector slogging down grade. A wild-haired, grizzled sort. Gil hailed him with a whoop.

"Hi, ye damn' Skunk! Goin' home with your tail draggin'? It's George Jackson," he told the others, "a first-comer here."

Jackson eased his pack off. "Howdy, ye damn' Self Riser! Say, you're the second crazy bunch I've met up thisaway."

"Second bunch?" Gil asked.

"Certain! Met the fust a couple days ago in Poverty. Told 'em I'd panned all over and never cleaned a speck, but they went ahead."

He stuffed tobacco in his mouth and spat. "Funny thing, them galoots was the scabbiest lot! One was Jimberjaw—you know *him*. Hell, the Bummers don't gen'rally bother to dig gold. 'Druther let some decent feller sweat, then grab it."

"They was after somethin' big," Gil scowled, or somebody!"

He was worried when they left Jackson to move on. The thing he feared had happened all too often.

There was no trail in Poverty; every step was a scramble, with mountain water pour-

ing close. They camped on a shelf, and early next afternoon approached the rugged cut of Bobtail Gulch, where a smaller stream foamed out.

Here Gill called a halt. "Wait till I see what's what."

But Alec shook his head. "Jumpers, hey? We'll go in together.

And Amy pulled the rifle from a pack-saddle. "You two have pistols. I'll handle this." She slipped a fresh cap on the nipple.

Gil didn't argue. He led the way, Jerry's lead-rope in one hand, gun in the other. Rounding a rocky shoulder, he saw new piles of gravel all along the creek, the cut stubs of alder and willow. Saw a lop-sided brush shanty; and a group of tattered, earth-stained men. He counted eight.

The claim-jumpers weren't taken by surprise. They had been waiting for this meeting. Each had a big revolver in his fist.

"You're on my claim," Gil said flatly, and pointed with his gun. "Those are my stakes."

Jimber Heil grinned, his toothy jaw sticking out wolfishly. "Wrong, Mister Self Riser! It's my claim now."

"I filed on it." Gil kept cool and quiet.

"Go back to town an' git the law. If ye can!"

There wasn't any real law, Gil knew. The miners hadn't banded together for protection; and the sheriff wouldn't care about trouble so far away. He looked at the dirty, hairy, rapscallion crew, recognized a few. Lumpy O'Leary; White-eye Dixon; and the half-Cherokee from Georgia, Bill Bird.

"How much ground have ye took up?" he asked.

"Eight claims," Jimberjaw told him gleefully. "Got the gulch all staked, up to that leetle side gully. But don't git mad! Plenty o' room at the top end."

"That end's no good, and you know it." Gil turned to his friends. "There's grass and water up there, anyway. They'll let us through."

"Glad to obleege!" Heil jeered. His gang stood aside, and their laughter grated in Gil's ears.

HALFWAY up the gulch he swung left, jumping the little creek. "Here's the side gully," he said. "Get in here!" Then he turned to Amy, a hand stretched out. "Gi'me that gun, girl!"

She looked at his tight face—and handed over the rifle.

Gil broke open a pack of paper-rolled cartridges and laid them on a handy rock, with a handful of copper caps. Kneeling at the gully mouth, he aimed down the gulch and fired.

In a moment he had rammed home another charge and fired again—and again—and again. The banging explosions racketed between the rocky walls.

Down gulch, a bullet threw up dirt by a booted foot. Another whanged on a stone and snarled away. Another knocked a battered hat from a frowzy head.

The Bummers scattered, ducking for cover. But there was no cover; only thin brush and the flimsy shack. They shot back wildly with their pistols. Two started to rush forward as they fired, then turned back. A minute later they were all stampeding out of Bobtail Gulch.

Gil stood up, feeling satisfied. "There! 'Twas my fault, talkin' too much in the Elephant. Now we got the ground."

Amy was staring as if seeing him for the first time, but her father was smiling. "Bit high-handed, warn't ye?" Alec asked. "Only one claim was reely jumped. The other fellers simply beat us out."

"Two can play at the jumpin' game," Gil scowled.

"Reckon they'll be back."

"Then we'll run 'em off agin!"

Alec shook his head. "Won't need to. I been lookin' around while you was slam-bangin'. You say there's gold in the main gulch below this dry gully? None above?"

"That's the way of it."

"Well, this gully ain't always dry. It runs water in spring and fall. Just room for our claims, too."

"Our claims?" Gil gaped in amazement. Had his partner gone crazy?

Alec laughed. "Yes, sir! Because the gold all come from here. Washed out and down the main gulch. And I bet there's plenty left!"

He was right. They dug a few test holes, carrying the pans of sand over to the creek. The results made their eyes bulge.

"We'll hafta lug it all to the water," he said, "or else bring water to our diggin's. It'll be worth the trouble, though."

"Certain sure!" Alec rubbed his forehead with a wet hand. "All the heavy stuff is there

yet—only the dust sluiced out. We'll foller it up to the mother pocket. A damn' big glory hole!"

Amy fingered the yellow grains, but spoke of something else. "'Most time for supper. Let's make camp—you can grub dirt tomorrow."

That was sensible. "Gotta put the jacks in the upper gulch," Gil remembered. "Watch 'em, too, with them roughs a-roamin' free."

"The roughs will be back," Alec said again.

He was right again. They had rigged Amy's tent and were making a brush shelter for themselves, when a hail came from down the gulch.

"Hi! Hello, there! Can a feller talk peaceable?"

Gil stepped out with the rifle. He saw a lone figure standing motionless, hands in the air. "Come along!" he shouted.

The man came, dropping his hands but keeping them wide of his belted gun. He was tall and buckskin-jacketed, with a dark face.

Gil fixed him with a hard eye. "I'm surprised at you, Bill Bird! One of the first prospectors on Cherry Creek, I hear. A reg'lar Pike's Peak Skunk, throwin' in with Bummers!"

The half-Cherokee mumbled something about bad luck.

"It's worse luck mixin' with that rough-scuff," Gil told him. "Now what do they want?"

Bill explained haltingly. "All our grub is in the shanty. Jimberjaw says ye can have your claim, if ye'll let us work the rest without no war. Be better fer you; two men an' a kid agin us eight."

Gil eyed him steadily. "You linin' up with 'em?"

The other shrugged. "I'm with 'em now."

"All right," Gil said. "You scum can have the gulch from here down—if ye'll be good. We're locatin' in this gully. One thing," he added. "Who staked the ground here, in front?"

Bill looked up quickly. "I did."

"Ye gotta let us through for water."

"Why, sure!" Bill agreed. "I'll do that. I'll see the others don't do nothin' dirty, too."

Gil went back to the gully, wondering how things would turn out. Digging gold would keep the roughs quiet; unless they got tired of hard work. The mules? They'd be a temptation, but not until the digging was done and the diggers ready to leave. . . .

The eight came meekly back to their shack. Next day they were all scratching gravel, each on his own location.

Meanwhile work went on in the gully, with no bother about legal registration. Gil lugged water in the camp bucket, while Alec turned up the sand. Amy made little bags of the deer-hide they had brought.

They grew richer every day. But what they were really seeking was the source of it all, the glory hole.

Gil often had a word with Bill Bird. The half-breed was always busy, with jacket off and brown body dripping sweat. His claim being at the gully mouth, it was the richest in the gulch.

Jimberjaw came poking his long chin into the gully just once, and found he wasn't wanted.

"Howdy, neighbors!" he wheedled. "We're short of grub—only had what we could pack on our backs. Mebbe ye'd help us out?" His ferrety eyes took in the diggings, the camp; and Amy, who was still smudgy-faced and a boy to all appearances.

"Not on y'r life!" Gil told him.

"Then lend me a jack, so we can pack some stuff in."

"Wouldn't trust ye," Gil said. "A mule is worth more'n gold in these mountains." And Jimberjaw went away, swearing.

The Bummers were running out of ambition, as well as grub. They would turn out late and work a few hours, then drop their rusty tools to lie around snoozing.

Bill Bird was the only real miner. "They've made a pile," he reported to Gil. "Now they're gettin' thirsty fer Denver licker. Me, I aim to stick an' clean up. Gotta watch out, though. They done soured on me, fer actin friendly to you Self Risers."

The mules had better be watched, too, Gil thought. He'd bring them into the gully every night.

Another idea came to him. "Mind if I ditch across your ground?" he asked. "If I lead creek-water to the gully, I won't hafta lug every drop."

"Go ahead," Bill said. "I'll pan the dirt ye dig."

Gil started his trench next morning, after turning the jacks out again; the two big ones hobbled, little Jerry loose as usual. He could

keep an eye on all of them in daytime.

He began to dig near the gully. There was color in the stuff he threw up; he could see the bright particles. Bill filled his pan, grunting with satisfaction.

The ditch grew deeper, until Gil's head was below ground when he stooped. Gil grew hotter, too. He looked cautiously toward camp, made sure that Amy couldn't see. Then he pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside.

So he dug and sweated, bent to dislodge a rock and heave it out. The shot must have come then.

He didn't hear or even feel it.

THE next thing he felt was rough grit hurting his face. Then grit in his mouth. He spat it out, pushing himself up on hands that seemed strangely weak. He'd been lying face down in the ditch.

He sat there on the bottom, trying to think. One side of his face felt sticky. He put up a hand and it came away smeared with clotting blood.

His head was numb. He pulled at his old hat, still clamped on tight. It came off, and he was looking at a hole through the top from side to side, feeling the raw groove across his crown.

"By blazes!" he said. "Some feller lined me up like a turkey!"

Gil hauled himself out of the trench and pawed around dazedly for his shirt. It was gone. And of course his treasure—Amy's curl—was gone with it; and that was all he could think of for a minute.

Then he took a few staggering steps—and saw Bill Bird. Lying all sprawled out, with two bullet holes in his brown chest.

Suddenly Gil's head cleared. He yanked out his gun—thank heaven he still had it—and ran into the gully. His legs were strong again, but his stomach was sick. Sick with dread of what he might find.

The gully was deadly still, not a soul in sight. Had Alec and Amy been murdered? No! He heard voices inside the shack, and dove in.

Alec was sitting on the floor, with his right sleeve slit and a bandage around his upper arm. Amy knelt beside him, her face white behind its mask of smudges.

"How bad is it?" Gil panted.

There was huge relief in Alec's look. "Glad to se ye, boy! I ain't so bad. Only a slug through the meat part of my right arm."

Amy jumped up, tears blotting her cheeks. "Gil! We thought you were dead! We couldn't find you!"

He looked at her in wonder; he'd never seen her cry before. "I was buried deep," he said. "What happened?"

Alec swore. "The damn'dest thing! My gun wouldn't shoot! I'd been wearin' it at work, and 'twas full of sand."

"It was all so sudden!" Amy sobbed. "I didn't have a chance to get the rifle. And that Indian man! He stood up for us, and they shot him."

Gil nodded, glad that things were no worse. "What did they take?"

Alec gritted his teeth. "Weapons, blankets, grub, extry clo'es. The gold we'd hid. Jimberjaw set a gun to Amy's head and said, 'talk or ye'll have a dead boy."

Gil nodded again. "O' course they took the jacks, too." He spun the cylinder of his revolver, blowing sand from the nipples. "I'm goin' after 'em!" he announced.

"Take it easy, boy!" Alec protested. "There's too many!"

"They stole my shirt," Gil growled. Suddenly he remembered that he was standing there half naked, and felt his whole body growing hot. " 'Scuse me, Amy," he stammered, "for bullin' in without it."

The girl smiled then. "Oh, don't be so shy! It doesn't matter."

"Does matter!" he insisted. "There was something in the pocket."

They had been lucky two ways; that they hadn't all been murdered, and that Amy's disguise had been so good. Yet it was disastrous to lose supplies and pack-animals.

"I'll get help at Gregory Gulch," Gil promised.

Alec offered his shirt, but Gil refused it. He'd get his own back, he swore, or bust a gut! What really bothered him was losing that bright, silky lock. That it might be soiled by dirty sweat, maybe found and handled by dirty fingers.

He had to submit to Amy's care. "A mite lower would have killed you," she quavered as she washed his grazed head. "I must tie it up."

"Just mash on a gob of mud," he instructed, "and let her dry."

At last he tore himself away. He had thought of Bill Bird's buckskin jacket, but couldn't find it. Those rascals would thieve

anything! No doubt they had grabbed Bill's poke of dust.

He loped on up the gulch. Hands cupped at his mouth, he shouted, "Hi'ya, Jerry! Jerry boy!"

Sure enough, his hope was justified. There was a patter of hoofs and the little jack came scampering out of the brush. Loose without hobbles, he hadn't let the Bummers catch him!

Gil vaulted up. Jerry flattened his long ears and started down the gulch. He was tough and quick, even if he was small.

The Bummers would be afoot, Gil thought, and leading two loaded animals. He'd catch them soon. And then what? His one gun against seven—and a rifle?

He smiled, a bit grimly. He felt like an Indian, bare-bodied and riding bareback. He'd scout 'em like an Indian!

Because Gil couldn't get help at Gregory Gulch; he had lied about that. They wouldn't go back that way. They had been seen on the upward trail, tramping with packs on their backs. Seen by miners who knew their sort, and who'd be curious about the two mules.

You could steal gold and only the loser would care, but mule-stealing was a hanging business. So the thieves would head into the rough country; and Gil had to follow....

After all, he was no Indian. He lost the tracks along the North Fork. By the time he had found them—crossing the water and angling up eastward—it was night.

He made fire near a ledge and slept warm. Only he was obliged to wake up often, to keep it burning. Of course he was hungry. Jerry ate coarse grass and drank from the creek.

IN THE morning they were off again, Gil leading his jack up between mountain humps dark with pine and cedar. He soon sighted the Bummers' overnight camp. They hadn't been far ahead.

It was in a cut sheltered by timber. Gil stole forward, gun in hand. Three men still lay sleeping around the dead fire.

Sleeping? There was something queer about their motionless attitudes, with ragged, unblanketed limbs twisted or thrown out. He felt his hair bristle and his skin crawl as he sneaked close.

They were as dead as the fire! Killed while they slept.

"The other four done it!" Gil breathed. "So's to get more loot!" He swung up on Jerry.

At any rate, the odds were less now. He must be careful; he was close behind the four killers. . . .

Their tracks were not easy to follow, vanishing on hard-pan or outcropping rock. Gil chose the easiest passes then. Figured they'd be doing the same, heading for the river below Denver.

Suddenly he pulled up, ears and eyes alert. Shooting somewhere ahead!

Gil turned Jerry up a slope, amongst the pines, and rode forward under cover. Until he could look into a pass. Then he worked to the bottom for a closer look.

Two more dead men! One lay belly down, shot squarely in the back. The other—White-eye Dixon—still held a rusty pistol in his fist. He was wearing Bill Bird's jacket, and it was riddled and red.

"They're savin' me trouble, anyway," Gil muttered.

He kicked Jerry's ribs and moved on. Only a couple left out of seven, and he was right at their heels! He trotted through a rocky gap—and jerked to a halt.

There was no pass ahead, only steep mountainside slopping from north to south. A slide of rocks and rubble going down to sheer emptiness, with spiky tree-tops showing far below.

And two men were coming toward him over the slide. First Lumpy O'Leary, then Jimberjaw, leading overloaded mules. They had found no footing and turned back.

Gil slipped to the ground. He heard Lumpy's hoarse yell, saw his mouth make a black hole in his whickers. Saw him try to swing the mule broadside for cover.

But the animal shied away, lurching up hill. Topheavy, it pawed and scrambled, loose stones rattling down the slide. Lumpy was staggering, too. He let go the lead-rope to pull his iron.

Gil was ready for that. He threw one shot; and when the echoes had died and the smoke shredded, Lumpy was rolling over and over. Down the stony slant and out of sight.

The loose mule was picking its way to firm ground. Out on the slide, Jimberjaw had aimed the stolen rifle. "Ye long red devil!" he squalled, "Thought I'd laid ye!"

"I riz up!" Gil shouted back. " 'Cause you're wearin' my shirt!"

"Hell, you can have it!" the Bummer sang out. "I could drill ye, but I won't." He jerked his head at the mule behind him. "Got a fortun' in gold here—fer just the two of us. Let's go cahoots!"

"I ain't devil enough for that," Gil said, and sank on his left knee and hand as the rifle streaked fire.

The bullet sang over his head. He straightened his gun arm.

He didn't have to shoot. Something was happening out there on the slide! Whether from the trampling of hoofs and boots, or from the gunfire, a patch of raw ground had begun to move.

Jimberjaw dropped the rifle and fell, clawing for a hold. The mule, terrified, squatted on its haunches like a cat. Dust rose, rocks volleyed, gravel cascaded. With a great roaring sound the mass swept down the mountainside and over the ragged edge of nothing.

Man and mule went with it. . . .

ALEC and Amy were watching for Gil when he slogged back to Bobtail Gulch. They hurried to meet him.

"Glory, son!" he shouted. "How'd ye make out?"

Gil was leading two jacks; he had put half the overloaded mule's pack on Jerry. "Middlin,'" he answered glumly. "How are you?"

"Mendin' fine," Alec declared. "I buried Bill Bird, one-handed. Drug him to a hole. Say, boy, what about them thieves?"

"Finished," Gil said. "Oh, I didn't do it all. Didn't do much."

"Didn't do much!" Alec yelled. "Ye brung back most of our stuff!"

"Lost one critter," Gil sighed, "and all the gold."

Alec laughed. "We'll do without the critter. Dig more gold! We'll find the big pocket, sure!"

Uncomfortable, Gil sighed again. "I didn't get *my* pocket."

Then Amy flabbergasted him completely, and showed that she knew more than he'd thought. She came close, pulled his head down and kissed his whiskered mouth.

"Don't fret about that old curl!" she scolded. "You can have another when I let them grow."

Her face was clean now—too pretty for a boy's face. Already the bright hair had begun to crinkle around it. o o o

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 51)

1. If the ranch boss sent you out for a horse pestler, you should return with a man who herds horses.

2. True. A "horse man" is one who raises horses—according to rangeland terminology.

3. The expression "let the hammer down" refers to taking the rough edges off a horse.

4. The Western slang word, "line," means "rope."

5. A person is said to have many wrinkles on his horns when he is considered old and wise. Thus, a person is said to add wrinkles as he gains knowledge with experience and maturity.

6. "Mothering up" refers to a mother animal's claiming her young ones.

7. The Western slang term, to outfox, means to outsmart.

8. An over-bit is an earmark.

9. One is most likely to hear the cry "Pick him up!" at a rodeo.

10. The term "piker" probably originated with the game of faro.

11. If the ranchboss sent you out for a Rocky Mountain canary, you should return with a burro.

12. Buffalo killed in the winter generally had the best robes.

13. The term, to rust the boiler, is generally used in reference to drinking alkaline water.

14. In the slanguage of the cowpoke, a sachet kitten is a skunk.

15. True. A horse is said to be smoking his pipe if he has a lip which has been torn by the bridle bit.

16. According to slang, the term, smoke signal, is used in reference to a warning of any sort.

17. If an Indian came up to you muttering, "Supaway John," you should give him some food. "Supaway John" is a term which Indian food beggars characteristically used in the old days.

18. True. A sunfisher is simply a horse which sunfishes when he bucks.

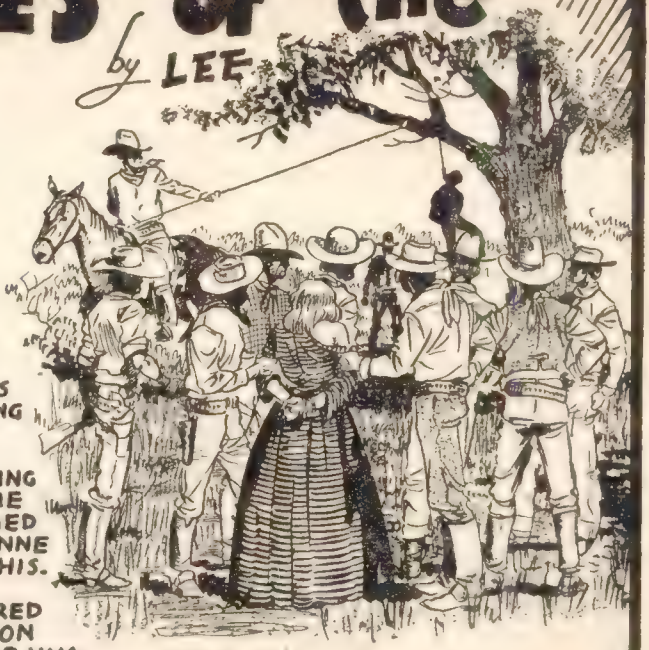
19. True. Tally branding means taking an inventory.

20. If you heard a cowpoke had taken the big jump, you would know he had died.

TALES of the

by LEE

THE JOHNSON COUNTY WAR

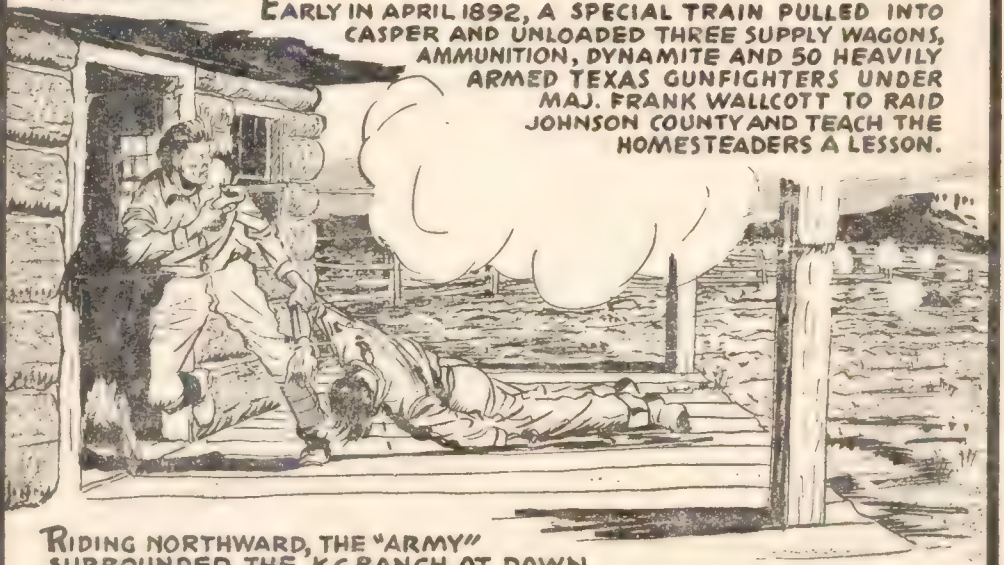


THE GREAT CATTLE BARONS SAW TROUBLE AHEAD AS WAVE AFTER WAVE OF HOMESTEADERS POURED INTO WYOMING IN THE 1880'S AND SET UP FARMS AND SMALL RANCHES ON THE RANGELANDS. RUSTLING BECAME BIG BUSINESS.

THE CATTLE KINGS, BRANDING EVERYONE WHO WASN'T ONE OF THEM A RUSTLER, FORMED AN ASSOCIATION IN CHEYENNE TO PUT A STOP TO ALL THIS.

TEN COWHANDS SHOULDERED INTO JIM AVERILL'S SALOON NEAR BOTHWELL, ACCUSED HIM AND HIS PARTNER — A WOMAN KNOWN AS "CATTLE KATE" — OF SWELLING THEIR HERD WITH UNBRANDED CALVES, AND HUNG THEM FROM A COTTONWOOD. RANCHERS WERE SIMILARLY STRUNG UP AND AMBUSHED ON LONELY ROADS OUTSIDE BUFFALO, JOHNSON COUNTY SEAT AND HOTBED OF THE NEWCOMERS.

EARLY IN APRIL 1892, A SPECIAL TRAIN PULLED INTO CASPER AND UNLOADED THREE SUPPLY WAGONS, AMMUNITION, DYNAMITE AND 50 HEAVILY ARMED TEXAS GUNFIGHTERS UNDER MAJ. FRANK WALLCOTT TO RAID JOHNSON COUNTY AND TEACH THE HOMESTEADERS A LESSON.

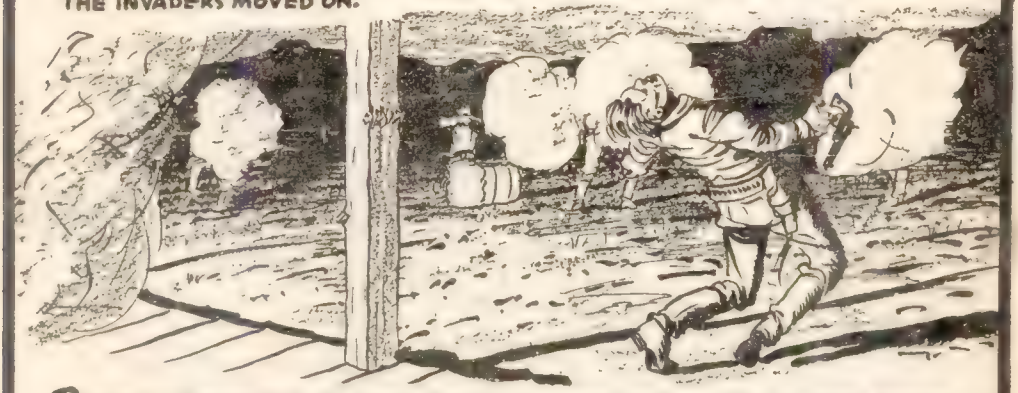


RIDING NORTHWARD, THE "ARMY" SURROUNDED THE KC RANCH AT DAWN. AS SMOKE ROSE FROM THE CHIMNEY, NICK RAE CAME OUT, LOOKED AROUND — AND FELL RIDDLED WITH RIFLE BULLETS. NAT CHAMPION BURST FROM THE HOUSE, COVERING HIMSELF WITH BLAZING SIXGUN, AND DRAGGED RAE INSIDE.

"OLD" "WEST"

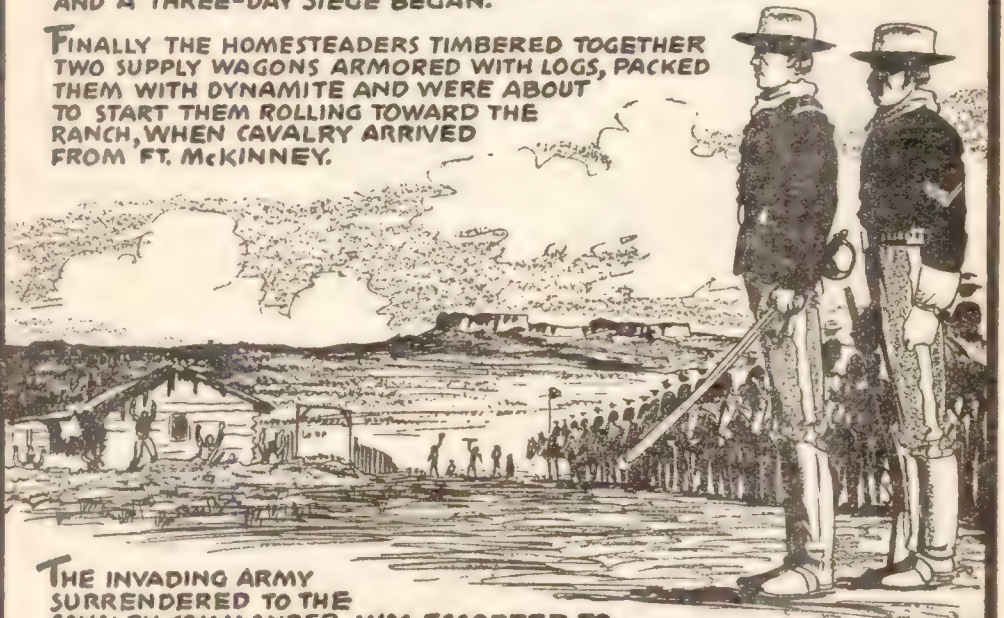
AS HE HELD THE INVADERS OFF, WOUNDING TWO SERIOUSLY, NAT RECORDED HIS FIGHT FOR LIFE IN A DIARY. NEIGHBORS RIDING BY IN A BUCKBOARD ESCAPED THROUGH A HAIL OF LEAD AND SENT WORD TO BUFFALO.-

TOWARD NIGHTFALL THE RAIDERS PILED A WAGON WITH HAY, PUSHED IT AGAINST THE BUILDING AND TOUCHED IT OFF. "THE HOUSE IS ALL FIRED. GOOD-BY, BOYS, IF I NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN!" CHAMPION WROTE, AND BROKE FOR THE WOODS. TWENTY-EIGHT BULLETS BROUGHT HIM DOWN. PINNING A CARD TO HIS CHEST READING "CATTLE THIEVES, BEWARE!" THE INVADERS MOVED ON.



BUFFALO BUZZED WITH EXCITEMENT. HASTILY ORGANIZED POSSES RODE AWAY AND SURROUNDED THE TA RANCH ON CRAZY WOMAN CREEK WHERE THE RAIDERS HAD DUG IN BEHIND BREASTWORKS, AND A THREE-DAY SIEGE BEGAN.

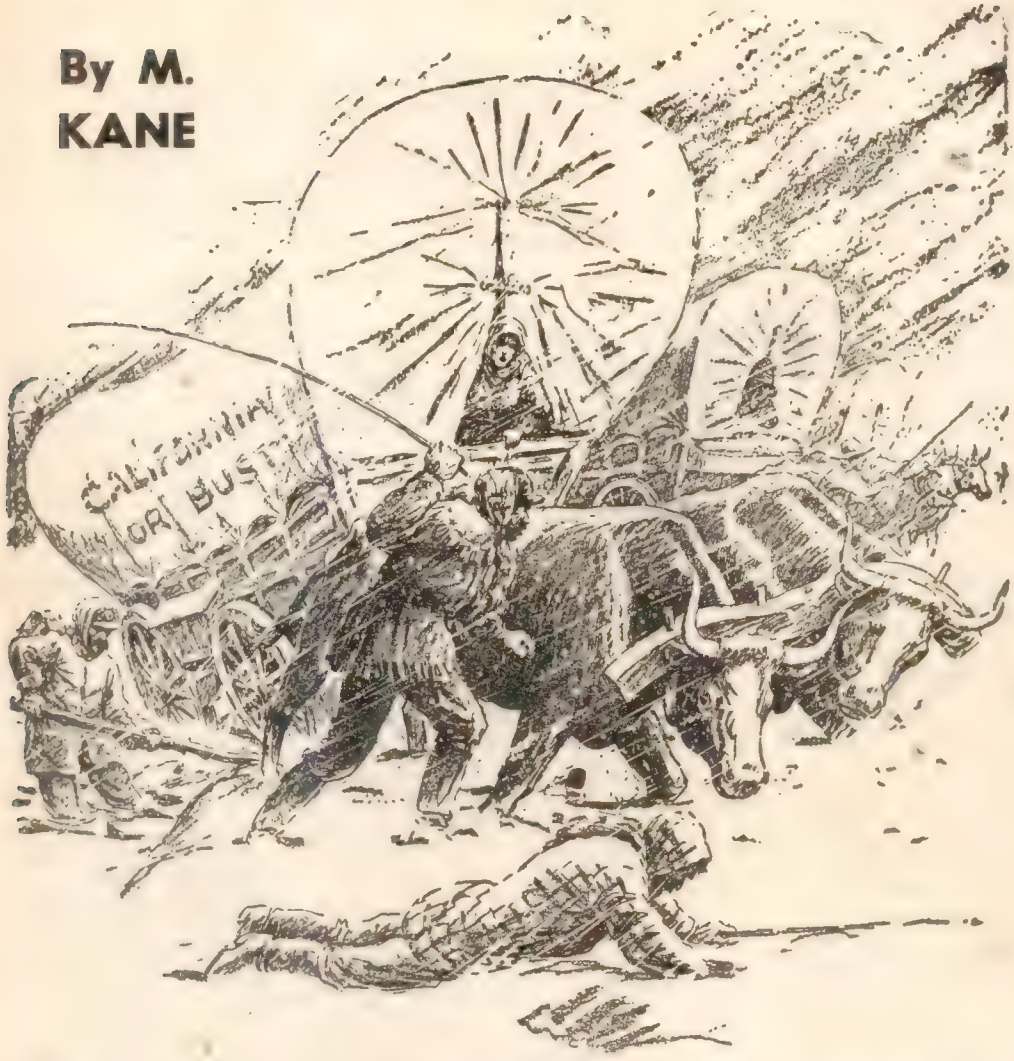
FINALLY THE HOMESTEADERS TIMBERED TOGETHER TWO SUPPLY WAGONS ARMORED WITH LOGS, PACKED THEM WITH DYNAMITE AND WERE ABOUT TO START THEM ROLLING TOWARD THE RANCH, WHEN CAVALRY ARRIVED FROM FT. McKINNEY.



THE INVADING ARMY SURRENDERED TO THE CAVALRY COMMANDER, WAS ESCORTED TO CHEYENNE — AND THE JOHNSON COUNTY WAR WAS OVER.

DEAD LINE!

By M. KANE



The men and women of that ill-fated expedition had to learn the hard way, that a straight line is the shortest distance—to disaster!

HE DIDN'T like walking, he said, in other men's dust. The new road always was a better road, for that reason, to James Frazier Reed. He was born in Ireland, in 1800, a product of the nineteenth century. There was blood in his veins that had come from farther east than that. Behind him was a strain of Polish nobility. He never got over it. To the end of his days, he was an aristocrat in homespun, taking the better road to the West.

He wasn't like the other adventurers on the California Trail in 1846. A prosperous Illinois farmer was as good as any man on earth—as wealthy, as independent, as a Polish nobleman. Reed headed for the Pacific as a modern man trades in last year's car—to get the newer and better model. He

was no stranger to hardship. He had built his life in Sangamon County when Illinois was frontier. He was a veteran of Indian wars. He expected to meet hardship again, and to put it in its place.

The Trail had never seen before, and would never see again, equipage like Reed's. He was a man of means, and didn't believe in traveling light. Of his three loaded wagons, one was a built-to-order job, a double-decker, that accommodated sleeping-bunks, a compact kitchen with cookstove, and the first private collection of rare wines and liquors ever to cross the Plains.

He had with him his wife and four children, his aged mother-in-law, the hired girl, and four teamsters. Eleven souls, rooted up from the past. Eleven, in blind loyalty following James Frazier Reed on his new road to the West. Before the summer was out, there would be more than eleven, and some would curse his name, and some would follow him, still in blind loyalty, to their deaths. He never forgot them. All his life, he had followed the sunset, in a kind of smoldering expectant fever. When he turned east, it would be in sorrow—it would be to find and to bury those who had followed him as far as they could.

Reed's wagons were three among more than one hundred. It was inevitable that when the emigrant party elected its five captains, Reed should be one of them. Just as inevitable, perhaps, that within a few days, a disgruntled citizen should suggest that all the officials be thrown overboard, and the prairie schooners proceed without them.

That was innocent. That was an omen, merely. The spring days were long and benevolent on the plains, and Captain Reed, emigrant, rode beside his traveling barony through the man-high grass, the burning dark eyes in the sunburned face fixed compellingly to the west, where the wheel-ruts should end, and the open free country began, beyond the reach of other men's dust.

A month later, when the wagons stopped overnight at Fort Bernard, Reed met a figure out of his back-trail. It was a meeting that roused his impatience. The past always bored him.

THE trail no wagon had taken before, lay between Fort Bridger and the sink of the Humboldt River. On the map, it made a straight line. It was recommended by Lansford Hastings, Californian, who had written a book about it. It cut out the Fort Hall stop-off that added inches on the map, hundreds of miles on the trail. It was the untried route that Reed had dreamed of all that dusty June on the prairie.

Now he was being warned by a seasoned traveler in those parts to take the old way, the broken path, to eat dust all the way to California. Jim Clyman, mountain man, needed no map. He knew his West. The Hastings cutoff, he said, was impossible.

Perhaps, if he had been a stranger, Reed would have listened to him. By an odd coincidence, the mountain man who came into camp that night had been a fellow-soldier of Reed's, in the Black Hawk War in Illinois, a decade and a half earlier.

He was part of a finished adventure, counseling an end to adventure. He looked at Reed's wagons, at Reed's family, and thought he had encountered an ordinary Illinois farmer, cautious and sedentary by habit. To whom this trip was merely an interlude between farms. He didn't know Reed. Reed would show him.

On July Fourth, in the badlands of South Wyoming, the hundred-odd wagons were together for the last time. Only twenty were going Reed's way. From here on, the rest —like all heavy traffic—would follow where traffic had gone before.

As though it were his private Independence Day, Reed broke into his liquor store, and treated the crowd he was about to leave to the biggest binge the badlands ever had known. They would need it, he thought, following each other's wheels to the Sacramento.

For himself, he was following something better. Lansford Hastings, author of the season's most sensational guidebook, had promised personally to guide Reed's group on the better road. First sign of Hastings that the party picked up was a note in a cleft stick, at the crossing of the Weber River in present Utah. Hastings suggested that the emigrants send horsemen on ahead, to meet him in the mountains.

Reed and two volunteers, leaving their families behind, went on horse into the Wasatch Mountains, on the other side of the river.

He came back, five days later—alone. The other men, he said, were waiting ahead on

the trail. Their horses had not been equal to the trip back. It was a trip, however, that the wagons and oxen must take.

It was mid-August. The little emigrant party was isolated in endlessness, with Fort Bridger far behind them, and the jagged, unknown, ahead.

If there was fear in the women's eyes as they looked at their leader, Reed tried not to be moved by it. He had had to retrace, turn east, after gaining fresh miles in the west—fear was always the look you saw when you looked in the east. It would pass, he thought.

It didn't. It couldn't. The Wasatch Mountains were only an inch on the map. But years later, when the U. P. built a railroad through them, it had to be done with dynamite. The farmers from New York State and Illinois who faced them now, had no dynamite.

They had only clumsy wagons, and frightened farm beasts, and children, and furniture, and wives. They followed Jim Reed for fourteen days through roads that didn't exist, into and out of box canyons where no white man's foot had ever trod before, and they brought their wagons along. Any Ute Indian who had wandered into those fruitless hills would have laughed himself to death, watching. Indians didn't haunt those mountains, however. They had more sense. They didn't read guide-books.

George Donner was titular head of the train, and in history, it bears his name. But Reed was its spiritual leader. It was Reed whom the emigrants slowly began to identify with fate itself, and hardship itself. By a miracle of will, he pulled them through. A consumptive youth in the party, worn out by the terrible fortnight, died on the plain west of the mountains. They buried him there, and went on. A German named Keseberg rifled an Indian grave, and it was Reed who exiled him from the group, for a matter of days, for tempting the wrath of the redmen through whose strange country they struggled.

They followed the straight line still, they blazed a trail straight up to the Great Salt Desert—and through it. It took them six days. When they entered the desert, they were frightened and exhausted—but most of them still were prosperous, as far as possessions afford.

Eighty-six emigrants, members of a dozen-odd family groups, finished the dry, nightmare crossing, into the alkali flats ahead. By any standards, white, Indian, east, west—they were all poor men now. They had blazed the new trail with abandoned and broken wagons—with bleaching oxen bones in the desert sun—with lost heirloom furniture that somebody's grandmother had brought from England in another era and another world, and that at last had finished its slow journey to the west.

They pooled together, somehow, what sticks and rags and beasts they had left. September had come. No one mentioned the word California any more. It was too far away—farther than it had been from Fort Bridger, three hundred dreadful miles ago.

ON THE thirtieth of the month, Reed brought them at last to the end of the new road—to the spot where it rejoined the main route at the Humboldt River. All the traffic was gone. The comrades from whom they had parted, on the Fourth of July, had already reached their destination, going the long slow way around, instead of by the straight line through the mountains and the salt.

Reed seemed to have made a mistake. They all were paying for it. But unless they meant to pay for it with their lives, they must follow him still. At one point, the choice didn't seem worth it. One of the men went for Reed with a bull-whip after a trifling argument, and Reed stabbed him to death.

Keseberg, the Westphalian, who had rejoined the party, propped up his wagon tongue for a hanging.

The leader had his friends—at his wrongest, at his unluckiest, Reed had always had the quality of arousing fanatical loyalty—and they drew their guns. They prevented the hanging.

But the group's misery demanded that someone be punished, somehow, for all they had endured. They convened a kangaroo court, and sentenced Reed to leave the party—without his rifle.

Leaving his wife and four children to the care of his friends and enemies, Reed once more traveled westward alone. During the night, he was joined by one of his teamsters from Illinois, who brought him a rifle, and stayed with him.

The rifle did them little good. Their only

path led through the high places of the Sierras. Game had fled to the valleys for the winter.

This was a traveled path. Five navy beans, and a tar bucket, had dropped from a wagon that had made the crossing that summer. The beans, and the tallow at the bottom of the bucket, saved Reed and his teamster from literally starving to death in the mountains. He had scorned other men's dust. This was different.

Dry beans, tar, and a fever that could not be burned out in one generation or one lifetime . . . these saw him through.

He reached the promised land alive. Broke, alone except for the faithful Walter Herron, hungry . . . but alive. He tried to tell the settlers of the Sacramento Valley about the group he had left behind him on the trail.

No one listened. Instead, they offered him a captaincy at once in the California Irregulars, then being mobilized, to win independence from Mexico. So swiftly, so inopportunely, he had become a native son.

But for once, the arrogant heart of James Frazier Reed had oriented fearfully toward the East.

He compromised, accepted a lieutenancy instead. They sent him out with a pack train, ostensibly to recruit men. He headed for Johnson's ranch, at the foot of the Sierra trail, expecting to meet the party that had banished him.

Snow had cut off all travel, up or down. There was no sign of the overdue emigrants he had last seen in Nevada. He struggled up the mountainside as far as a man alone could go. Beyond that line, lay merely death.

Through December and January, the high-hearted irregular war went on, encountering little resistance. Reed rode with the home guard, listened to patriotic speeches, and pled for help for the group that had banished him to die. Here, in the valley, there was the warm Japan Current, and mock-war, and laughter. In the silent mountains, he knew, it was winter. Not until February was there time for California to listen to Reed's story. Then, in honor of his military service, the Navy sponsored a mass meeting for him. He rose to speak. At last, he had the ear of every able-bodied man in the settlements. He was a leader, a trailblazer, a man of action. He had served in two frontier wars, he had made a fortune with his brain and hands, and lost it in the same way, without flinching. He began to talk about the families who had followed him from Fort Bridger. The words didn't come. Instead, he wept.

Others reconstructed the story for him.

Some clue as to the emigrants' fate had reached the settlements a week before. On that day, a ghost of a creature, mainly bones, more dead than alive, staggering on bloody feet, had reached Johnson's ranch. It was William Eddy, of Illinois, completing his straight-line route to California.

He had come over the pass and down the Sierras through thirty feet of snow, without rations or supplies. Seven of his companions had died on the way. He had left the main part of the party stranded in the mountains, Reed's little family among them.

They were enduring in improvised shelters there, he reported. They had been surviving, when he left, on field mice who stole in for warmth—and on those of their number who were not surviving.

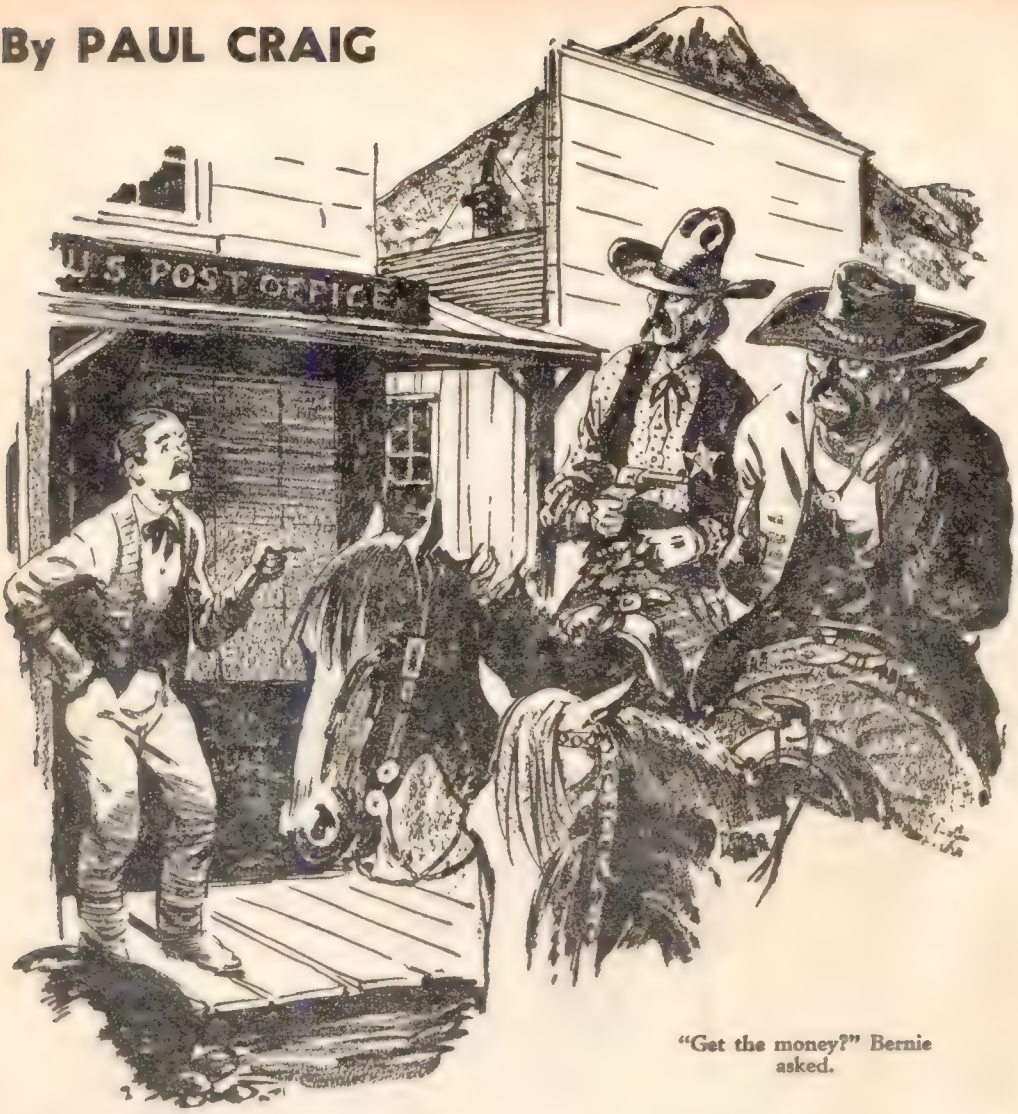
CALIFORNIANS raised thousands of dollars to finance the rescue—but to Reed, the greatest gift of all was the help of those fearless men who were willing to make the ascent into the snows with him. Every man who volunteered knew he was risking his life.

The old magic was there, though he was numbed to it now himself. He attracted followers. He asked for comrades on the trackless path to death, and the best and the strongest rose and went with him.

Single file, through sun and storm, into impossible altitudes and impossible cold, on snowshoes, the little rescue band made its way for fifteen days. On the fifteenth day, on the eastern face of the pass, they came upon a cluster of crude huts on the frozen crust.

(Please continue on page 113)

By PAUL CRAIG



"Get the money?" Bernie asked.

PERILOUS POST

Little Bernie's postmaster's job wasn't much, but he was proud of it, and he intended to deliver the mail—even if the address was boothill!

IT WASN'T often that Bernie Imbler was scared. But when he heard the shriek of the 4:15 something encased in his spine quivered in alarm. Bernie clutched the mail sack that hung limply over his shoulder and dragged his game leg more solidly under his runty body. Then he turned to stare down the track and watch the afternoon passenger train roar into town.

Except for the wrappers, Bernie wasn't supposed to know anything about the contents of the two mail sacks that, as Red

Butte's postmaster, passed daily through his hands. The one on his thin shoulder, which he would exchange with the railway mail clerk, held six letters and two postcards and a return he had been unable to deliver to somebody by the name of Siswich. It was the pouch he would get off the train that had Bernie worried.

He didn't want to show that he was uneasy for the same reason that he was in that state. With the cattle drives coming in, Red Butte's population was doubled. The regular drivers, who had been coming in for years, were all friends of Bernie, men who caused him no distrust. But there was hardly a trail crew that didn't contain one or two men picked up for the job, range floaters, and some of them pretty sorry looking characters. There were several of this ilk in the crowd at the depot to see their train go through. If they saw how nervous he was, they'd know for sure that this was the fateful day.

Ordinarily Bernie would have enjoyed this crest hour in Red Butte's sleepy afternoon. There was something satisfying in tossing his sack through the mail car door, maybe getting socked with one from the mail clerk, who would grin at him intimately. Bernie was the government man here in Red Butte. He handled the mail and sold stamps and money orders. The waiting room of his little cubicle, down the street, displayed recruiting posters and dodgers on men wanted for federal offenses and advertisements for bids on government contracts. Such things always came from someplace to Bernie, marked: POSTMASTER, RED BUTTE.

The train whistled again at the mile-post, and once more Bernie felt that riffle of apprehension climb his spine. The train slacked off its onrush, its racket changing character. Its bell began to clatter, then it crept in before the depot and ground to a squawling stop.

By then Bernie was hobbling along beside the mail car door. He had tossed his own sack aboard but today, he knew, he would receive a registered mail pouch, in addition to the regular sack. If he was lucky, he would be responsible for the contents of the registered pouch for no longer than a half hour.

"Howdy, Bernie!" the mail clerk called In the months he had been on this mail run, Bernie had never learned his name, but he was white-haired, portly, a grinning man with a friendly word for everybody along the line. The clerk tossed out a mail sack that inevitably hit Bernie's thin chest hard enough to make him grunt.

When the man just stood there after that, Bernie frowned and said, "No registered pouch?"

"Not today, there ain't," the clerk said.

Bernie felt relief break in him, which quickly vanished. It would be along tomorrow, and he would have another night and the better part of another day of dread.

Then the clerk said, "Wait a minute, now. Maybe there is." He laughed.

Walking straight toward the post office with his two sacks, presently, Bernie guessed he'd got to showing his worry too much the first day of every month, if the mail clerk had noticed it enough to plan a joke.

The post office stood between Prine and Darcy's mercantile and the Golden Steer saloon. It had its own little board awning, no bigger than a postage stamp as the wags claimed. Bernie noted the punchers on the street, one eating a can of peaches he had bought in the mercantile, spearing the slices with his jackknife. Others showed that they had been in the saloon frequently and long.

They were weathered, hard-muscled men Bernie had quit envying after he got the government job. Before he secured the postmastership, he had clerked at the Bank hotel. It hadn't been his size that had kept him out of the saddle but a withered leg that made it necessary for him to wear a boot with a six-inch sole and made him too unsteady for the range work that had to be done on foot.

Hauling himself past the shining windows of the Bon Ton millinery, Bernie got his one pleasant thrill of this nerve-racking day. Juliet Tasman was looking out, and she smiled at him. She was prettier than a calendar picture and, better than that, was so tiny and warm-natured she made Bernie feel all man, whereas the big, horsy saloon girls only made him want to melt in his boots. Now he knew that Juliet had identified the registered pouch, simply because he carried two of them, and was admiring him for the responsibility he had to take as the government's local representative.

People were waiting outside the post office, looking expectant, and one or two of them would actually get some mail. Bernie slid his key into the lock and opened the door.

But he shut the door and locked it again as soon as he had stepped through, though ordinarily he let his patrons wait in the outer room while he got the mail sorted out.

Bernie unlocked a second door to let himself into the private part of the post office. Instantly, there was a thumping on the glass of the outer door. Bernie frowned when he turned to see the shoulders and set face of Lee Elwood beyond. Elwood's lifted hand made an urgent motion.

Bernie was of a mind to ignore the man, but that wasn't good policy with Lee Elwood. There was only one bank in Red Butte, and it was the post office's biggest patron, and Lee Elwood ran the bank. The bank also was responsible for this registered pouch being thrown off at Red Butte the first day of each month. The pouch contained a single large envelope, addressed to Elwood.

Bernie wasn't supposed to know what was in the envelope, but he did. So did almost anybody else who had lived in Red Butte long enough to learn something of the workings of the town. The fat envelope contained currency in big denominations, the monthly exchange from the bank's principal correspondent down in Tuber City. It was a monthly routine, but now the cattle buyers were in Red Butte. They wrote their checks on the Tuber City bank, but the checks were mostly deposited or cashed in the local bank. So the checks were sent out, and cash came back. Bernie had heard people talking about how Elwood's bank could cash so many checks on other banks without going broke. That was how, and Bernie wished he and Elwood were the only ones who knew.

Merely thinking this over as he limped back to see what Elwood wanted, Bernie was surprised to see Elwood swing suddenly and disappear. That suited Bernie. He hauled around again, went back to the inner door and stepped through, closing the door behind him. He tossed the mail pouches onto the table under the sorting pigeons.

He didn't hear the sound. All he knew was that something hit him across the head with the force of a piledriver. He saw a hundred mad comets take off through a black void. He fell into the blackness himself, and that was the extent of his awareness....

THE worn grain of the floor was rough on his cheek when he regained consciousness. It was totally quiet, and he didn't know how long he had been out. He got his eyes open, lifted his head and looked around. This back room was empty except for himself. But he hadn't just bunged his head on something. The registered mail pouch was unlocked. Bernie didn't have to be told that it was empty.

Weak and dizzy as he was, Bernie shoved onto his feet, his face twisted in stark disbelief. The first thing he felt was the outrage of it, the sheer effrontery to the government and its agent. Shame tumbled on the heels of that. They hadn't even vouchsafed him the dignity of a hold-up. Somebody had simply got in here, waited, and laid him out cold. Bernie blinked his eyes hard, refusing to believe it had really happened.

It struck him that a lot of people were still waiting out on the sidewalk for the door to be opened and the mail passed out. Bernie opened the small delivery window a crack and peered out. They were still out there. A couple of men were at the outside window, their hands shading their eyes while they stared in curiously.

Somebody thumped on the door, then a man bawled, "Hey, Bernie! Hurry up and get our mail read so we can read it ourselves!"

That joke was never very funny, and right now it turned Bernie hopping mad. He walked over to the back door, which opened onto the alley, and it was still locked. But its key lay on the floor. The thing had been that simple. Somebody had got in with a pass key, working the regular key out of the lock. This person had hidden in the little gear locker in the back corner where Bernie kept a broom and dust-pan. He had stepped out at the right moment and swiped a gun barrel across the postmaster's head. The postmaster—Bernie's eyes blazed. The first thing was to notify the government of what had taken place.

But even before that there was the mail to deliver. Nobody needed to know about this but Elwood and the government. Bernie opened the regular mail sack and was relieved at its light content. It took only a few minutes to get it sorted and properly pigeon-holed. Then he went out and opened the street door and stood back for the rush.

"What's the trouble, Bernie?" Holt Harbaugh demanded. "Man'd think the winter catalogs had come in. You been half an hour."

Bernie waved that aside and went in behind the delivery window. His head ached furiously and felt like it had a bump on it the patrons ought to be able to see. But nobody made any comment. Those who got mail were too excited and those who didn't were too disappointed. Within ten minutes the place was cleared.

Bernie dreaded the next moments. Lee Elwood would be in now. He always waited until the post office was empty to come in quietly and sign for his registered letter. And when Elwood did show up presently, Bernie still hadn't figured out how to explain it in a way that didn't make Bernie Imbler out a half-wit for having let the robbery happen so easy.

Elwood brushed impatiently through the door. He was middle-aged, a thin man with a large nose and ascetic face. A bachelor, he lived at the same boarding house Bernie did and courted the same girl, Juliet Tasman, who also boarded with Missus Tetherow.

"Got my letter?" Elwood asked.

Bernie shook his head.

"But you had a registered pouch," Elwood said.

"That's right," Bernie admitted. "And I still got it. But your bank exchange is gone. Somebody got in and hid and knocked me colder than a mackerel!"

"Are you crazy?" Elwood demanded.

"Just stupid," Bernie said.

Elwood's eyes had narrowed dangerously. "And how did you know it was a bank exchange, Bernie?" he demanded.

"Who in blazes don't know that's what comes in every month?" Bernie retorted. "I ain't got your registered letter, Elwood. And now I got to go to the depot and wire the government." He put on his hat, just in case the lump showed on his head. Elwood went out, fuming aloud about what would happen, not only to Bernie Imber but to the government itself, if he didn't get that letter back, apparently within the next few minutes.

Bernie tramped back up the street to the depot, realizing finally that he wasn't going to keep it secret. Not only did the emotion in Lee Elwood seem to require public expression. The railway agent, old Bob Simms, was less close-mouthed about public matters that passed through his hands at the depot than Bernie was with regard to the post office. There was no way of writing a telegram that Bob wouldn't read when he transmitted it. A thing like a post office robbery would set old Bob on fire.

BERNIE walked into the depot, wrote a telegram to the superintendent of the postal division and handed the message to Bob. The old agent wet a pencil in his mouth and counted the words. That he was accomplishing more than that was evident in the way his nostrils began to dilate.

"By damn!" Bob breathed cheerfully. "So you finally went and loused up the mail."

Bernie flipped a coin on the counter, muttered, "Keep the change to buy yourself bird seed, you old jaybird!" and limped out. There had always been a great deal of competition between him and Bob Simms—government official versus railroad official, so to speak.

But nobody stopped Bernie on the way back to the post office to ask fool questions, so Lee Elwood hadn't yet disclosed the bank's loss. There was no use hoping that Elwood had stepped quietly into his office, put a pistol to his head and pulled the trigger because of the bank's impending failure. Elwood wasn't that accommodating.

Bernie knew he ought to go and look up Trink Salter, the town marshal, who would want in on the case. But Bernie knew from kindred happenings elsewhere that after tomorrow's train there would be postal inspectors behind every bush in Red Butte. Bernie had a consuming ambition, which was to have the case solved, the money back in proper hands, and nothing left but a few dozen reports to make out by the time the inspectors reached town. If anything, Salter would complicate that. He was a fast man with a clue himself.

But conscience took Bernie on down the street. He found Trink Salter in a penny-ante game in the Gold Steer. He quietly called the marshal forth, then tok him back to the post office and on into the rear room. That was a private domain that nobody but Bernie and visiting post office people ever entered. Salter sensed the importance of the occasion even before he heard what it was about. He was a retired cowhand Red Butte had hired to keep other cowhands in something like a civilized state while in town.

"Well, I'll be blamed," Salter breathed, when Bernie had explained it. "Federal case, Bernie, but I'll help all I can. Who could have known that money was coming in to-

day?" The marshal looked as owlish as if he didn't realize half the town had been privy to that information. He added, "Let me put it another way. Who could of got in here and laid for you?"

"You're narrowing it right down, Trink," Bernie complimented. "Now you get on it. Come around again at train time tomorrow to talk to the inspectors that are bound to show up."

Salter shuffled off. Now Bernie dropped into the barrel chair by the fireless heating stove in the backroom, which to him was sort of a philosopher's seat. Salter would begin by listing all the queer characters in town and start checking on their movements around train time. He had the authority to do so and might get somewhere, but this was a case Bernie just had to solve himself.

Bernie rose presently, picked the key off the floor, unlocked the door and stepped through. There was a small, roofless porch out back, sagged at one corner. The robber had stood here for a time, patiently working the regular key out of the lock so he could use his own. The backs of business structures lined this side of the alleyway. Across, it was a different proposition. A taxidermy shop stood on the far, left-hand corner of the block. Then came a brushy vacant lot. Directly across from Bernie, now, stood the back side of Missus Tetherow's boarding house. There was another empty lot, and on the other cross-corner loomed the empty walls of the old lodgehall.

The only one who might have observed the robber at work, getting in, or seen him coming out, would have been over in the boarding house where Bernie lived himself. A half dozen windows blinked at him stupidly. He blinked back, and felt just as stupid, for it was the first time he had ever failed the mail.

Somebody came in the front way so noisily that Bernie heard it clear back here. By the time he got to the delivery window he had recognized Lee Elwood beyond.

"Listen!" Elwood commanded. "How do I file a claim? How long will it take me to get reimbursed for that money? How long does the government think I can run a bank with its funds tied up in a mess like this?"

Bernie was staring at Elwood, remembering something. "How come you tried to stop me when I come in with the mail?" he asked. "Then disappeared."

"I wanted that registered letter," Elwood said promptly. "Then somebody yelled from the bank door and I had to go back. Who's asking who questions, anyhow? I want to file a claim for my money. How do I do it?"

"You'll have to wait till the inspectors get here," Bernie confessed. "I dunno."

Elwood stormed out again, fairly beside himself with worry. Embarrassment that was close to crushing guilt filled Bernie. Naturally Elwood would worry, with a considerable chunk of the bank's assets on the loose somewhere. Bernie didn't know if the government would consider itself responsible and so reimburse Elwood for his loss. If it did, it was apt to turn around and hold Bernie Imbler responsible and start looking for a new fourth-class postmaster.

Bernie went back to the rear porch again and resumed his study of the layout. The porch didn't so much as show him a pair of suspicious bootprints. It looked like one good stomp would cave it in. Then Bernie hunkered suddenly. Something lay on the ground beneath the tilted side of the porch. Bernie swung himself down to the ground, bent and picked it up.

It was a pellet of buckshot. Bernie eyed it and then the sagged slope of the porch. He understood then that he had not been knocked slab-cold by a gun barrel but by an improvised blackjack of gunshot in a sock or handkerchief. While working with the lock, or on his way out afterward, the robber had spilled a pellet on the porch and it had rolled off. That was no help. Prine and Darcy's probably sold half a dozen boxes of shotgun shells a week.

Bernie observed then that it was past his closing time. He locked up, leaving by the front door through which he usually cut straight across the alley to the boarding house. Now he wanted to see what kind of word was out, if any, how deep a humiliation he was going to have to bear before the case was solved. If it was. He was discouraged about that even, now. His luck had sure clabbered.

He was abreast the big livery-barn door when Tod Monroe yelled at him. "Hey, Bernie! Trink Salter told me to tell you he's about cracked the case! Some trail cuss fogged out of town right after he conked you and took the bank's money! Trink got a horse and dusted after him! Swore he'd fetch him back!"

Bernie groaned his thanks. It wasn't going to help him much to have old Trink Salter square away the post office robbery. But if some trail character had fogged out of Red Butte around the time of the mail robbery, it very well could have been the guilty man.

Going on to the boarding house, Bernie let himself into an empty hall and climbed the stairs to his room. It was a cheerful room, with a big bay and crisp white curtains, but now it depressed him. Behind the curtained closet in the corner was a new store suit he had never worn, new boots he'd had on only once in the privacy of this room. There was a new hat on the shelf, new white shirts in his bureau.

For six months now, he had been trying to screw up the grit to ask Juliet to go to supper with him at the hotel, or to a lodge-hall dance, or almost any place. He had never asked her, and so she continued to do those things with Lee Elwood. It looked like she would keep right on doing them with Elwood while Bernie Imbler went back to the hotel desk, no longer a public official, no more a man of distinction in Red Butte town.

BERNIE almost didn't stir when Missus Tetherow rang the supper bell. But the racing feet in the hallway were magnets evoking habit responses within himself. He emerged just as Juliet came out of her room across the hall. She had changed to a simple dress and looked like a half-grown girl. But she wasn't—Bernie's loud swallow betrayed his awareness that she was much further along than that.

"I heard, Bernie," she said, "and I'm sorry. Lee's fuming about you, but I know it wasn't your fault." The voice, let alone the words, told him that she really did feel bad about his trouble.

Juliet started to move toward the stairs beside him, then gave a sudden little start and grabbed his arm. She looked down at the floor with a puzzled expression.

Bernie's eyes bugged as he bent. "Danged near tripped you, didn't it?" he asked as he rose, holding up a buckshot pellet.

"Sure did," Juliet agreed. "Who is there around here that does any hunting?"

Who indeed? Bernie wondered, pocketing the buckshot with the one he had picked up behind the post office. They went down the stirs together, entering the dining room and took a seat at the big, crowded family-style table. Missus Tetherow had half a dozen boarders, all of whom Bernie liked except for Elwood and old Widgy, who worked in Elwood's bank. Widgy should have worn skirts, because he was shrill and gossipy, and beyond that was as stingy as his Scrooge-like face sugegsted. But, unlike Elwood, Widgy's only interest in Juliet lay in wheedling her into doing his mending for him. Juliet did it because it wasn't in her to be unkind to anybody.

Bernie had a painful moment after supper, fearing that he would have to endure watching Juliet depart with Elwood for another after-supper walk. She spared him that, maybe realizing how much he already bore. Juliet told Elwood she had a little mending to do for Widgy and went up to her room.

Returning to his own room, Bernie rolled a cigarette and stretched on the bed to smoke it. He was bitterly unhappy. Any time now Trink Salter would be coming back with the man who robbed the post office. Tomorrow the postal inspectors would come to Red Butte. It was a hell of a world.

Bernie had smoked that cigarette and three successors when he heard a light rap on his door. It opened hestitantly when he spoke, then Juliet came into the room. She carried a man's coat, which he recognized as Widgy's. Moreover, she was violating one of Missus Tetherow's strict rules by coming here, and Bernie wondered why.

"Why don't you tell that old maid to do his own mending?" Bernie snapped.

"I don't mind," Juliet said. "It just had a hole in the pocket and in the lining. Bernie, I got to wondering. Who'll have to stand the loss if you don't get the money back?"

"Government, I reckon," Bernie said. "If they don't take it out of my hide. But old Trink Salter thinks he's on the man's trail. That old cuss'll nail whoever he's chasing, anyhow." He raised up suddenly on the bed. "What was that dropped out of Widgy's coat?"

"What do you know?" Juliet said, looking down at the frayed carpet. "Old Widgy's the buckshot dropper. Maybe he's taken on ballast to keep the wind from blowing him away." She felt of the coat lining along its lower hem. "There's another two or three in there."

"Leave 'em!" Bernie said sharply. "And

hold onto that coat! Tell Widgy you run out of thread! And don't say anything about that buckshot!"

"Heavens!" Julie breathed. "Has old Widgy been naughty?"

"I aim to find out," Bernie breathed.

But Widgy wasn't in his room, nor was Elwood in his. Neither man was the type inclined to hang around the places where gayety reigned of an evening. They had probably gone back to the bank to inhale a little dust from the ledgers. Bernie went down the stairs as fast as his bad leg would permit, and he made his way to the main street at the same speed.

Dusk had come in. Red Butte, with the trail drivers in town, was a festive scene. But there was a light in the bank, and that was where Bernie was heading.

He got only half way. Two riders came down the street, one ahead of the other. Even at a distance, Bernie recognized Trink Salter. The rider ahead had his hands lashed behind him, and old Trink held a gun on the man. Apparently word of Trink's one-man posse had spread around. Men began to follow along the street behind Trink.

Trink did Bernie the honor of pausing when he came abreast. He yelled, "Here's your man, Bernie! Caught the cuss at Sulphur Sinks. Headed him off, by damn, and he nearly choked on his tongue from surprise."

"Get the money?" Bernie asked.

"Cuss cached it, Bernie. But I'll sweat it out of him. Me and the government people when they get here tomorrow."

"He confess?" Bernie asked. The prisoner surely looked like a tough customer, but that didn't prove anything.

"He will," Trink guaranteed.

"That's him, all right!" a man yelled from the sidewalk. "Drifted into town last night. Wouldn't talk. Wolf breed. He's the one I told you about, Trink. Seen him run out of the alley about the time the post office was robbed. What you got to say to that, Johnny Hardcase?"

"You go to hell," the prisoner said.

"See?" the man said weakly. "He won't talk. He's sure as shooting guilty."

"I'll lock him up," Trink Salter said.

BERNIE paused on the sidewalk while Salter and the prisoner moved on, the crowd following to see the jail put to a proper use. The man looked capable of the robbery, Bernie reflected, and had been seen coming out of the alley around the time it had taken place. But he was a stranger, and if he actually had done the job, somebody more familiar with the situation had put him up to it.

When he had pondered the matter for a long moment, Bernie shook his head. But it had killed his impulse to see old Widgy and ask him about that buckshot. That had been a wild notion, anyhow.

Bernie's shoulders squared and his chin thrust forward. He went on toward the bank as he had intended. The door was locked, the blinds drawn on all the windows. Bernie rapped lightly on the door. Pretty soon its blind formed a slit, and he saw somebody looking out. Then the door opened an inch or so.

"What do you want, Bernie?" Lee Elwood asked.

"About that claim," Bernie said.

"Come right in," Elwood invited.

He opened the door, and Bernie stepped inside. Elwood promptly shut the door again and locked it.

"You hear from the government, Bernie?" he asked. Something in his eyes looked excited and hungry. Will they make the claim good?"

Bernie shook his head. "Huh-uh, Elwood. The money's here. In your bank. You just got this batch without signing for it. The big one of the year, with the buyers in town. You got the money, and you figure to make the government reimburse you for it, too."

Elwood was a banker who could keep a straight face while foreclosing a mortgage. He couldn't keep one through what Bernie said.

Elwood's thick shoulders pulled up and the outrage that flooded his face had worry behind it.

"You got hit too hard, Bernie," he said finally.

"Got an alibi, haven't you?" Bernie asked. "Me and a couple dozen others saw you at my front door a minute before I got walloped. That won't fool the inspectors a minute, when I prove it was Widgy that walloped me."

Widgy's skinny face turned a pasty yellow. "Prove it? How?"

Bernie grinned at him. "Buckshot trail,

Widgy. You found the hole in your coat. Must not have known you had one in the lining, to boot. And that some buckshot's still in that lining. Way I figure it, you used a handkerchief and split the handkerchief when you hit me and didn't realize it till you found some loose shot in your pocket."

Widgy pulled himself tall and growled, "Preposterous!"

"There'll be more on the post office floor, Widgy, now that I've got sense enough to look. And the government inspectors're going to be here tomorrow."

Bernie's voice was confident, taunting. He could tie that buckshot to Widgy and make it tie Widgy to the post office, but it was going to be hard to prove that the money was indeed here in the bank. By now the registered envelope had been destroyed. The money would be reposing with a lot of other money, in no way branded.

Unless—Bernie had read somewhere that banks often kept track of the serial numbers on bills of large denomination. So he added calmly, "The government will close you up and have you audited. It'll get in touch with the Tuber City bank. And your dirty wash is hung out in the middle of main street, gents." He turned then and started for the door.

"Wait a minute," Elwood said. "I don't think you're going to tell anybody your suspicions, Bernie. Trink Salter caught a man. We heard them yelling about it. That solves the case to my satisfaction. Whether or not the man coughs up the money, the government will pay me for my loss. Bernie, you always did get in my hair. I won't miss you at all."

But Bernie was watching Widgy, who was edging along the counter to a point where Bernie suspected a gun was kept against the danger of a holdup. They intended to kill him and manufacture something to cover it up.

That worried Bernie, but it convinced him that he had laid it right on the line. They feared the outcome that he had predicted. He had only to stay alive and keep them incapacitated, until the thing could be done.

Since Widgy was going after the gun, Bernie went after Widgy. He hit the gate that separated this part of the room from Widgy's part, and the gate burst open. Widgy turned now and fled, ducking to grab something under the counter. He was old, but Bernie was runty and crippled. Widgy had a gun and was whirling with it when Bernie Imbler's lowered head rammed into him.

The gun exploded, the bullet crashing into the ceiling. Widgy fought like a wildcat, and every second he kept Bernie tied up Elwood would be seeking another gun, somewhere. Most cowtown banks had more than one on the premises. Bernie cocked a fist and dulled the tip of Widgy's jaw when he hit it. Widgy went down.

Bernie got the gun away from Widgy, glad to know it was a six-shooter. Straightening, he saw that Elwood had bolted into his private office. Bernie swung himself out through the gate, straight toward the door. A gun blasted as he framed himself in the doorway.

Then Bernie fired. He saw Elwood fold slowly over the top of the desk from which he had secured the gun. Then, for a second time that day, the black inner voids claimed Bernie. . . .

* * *

He was in his room at Missus Tetherow's when he recovered consciousness. His head was bandaged and he smelled perfume. He tried for a moment to figure out the connection as he lay there with a roaring head. Then he opened his eyes to see the concerned face of Juliet.

"It's all over, Bernie!" Juliet cried. "Wake up! It's safe to come back to this world, Bernie!"

"Trink's prisoner confess?" Bernie asked groggily.

"He did not. But Widgy did. Widgy had certainly been naughty."

Bernie lay there for a long moment, smiling. Let the inspectors come now. Bring on the reports the government would want. They'd see that the mail was in safe hands at Red Butte. Then he thought of something. The new clothes in the closet. Wedding suit, bought, paid for, and ready to wear. Why should he waste time trying to muster the grit to ask her to go steady with him? Wasn't any harder to ask her to marry him.

If the Shoe Fits—

Not till the outlaw returned would Eb Brandon know rest—or forget the eyes of the man who killed his father.

By DENNISON RUST

ON THAT fateful afternoon in mid-July down in Andora, Eb Brandon stood in the shade of his father's blacksmith shop, opposite the Andora State Bank, and watched old Job Brandon hammer out an iron tire rim. Eb Brandon was only fifteen, but next to punching cows, he wanted most to help out his father there at the smithy when he quit school. Now he stood, ready with the tongs, to take the white-hot rim and plunge it into the tub of water that stood nearby. The boy liked being near the deliberate black-bearded smith with his quiet, sure manner. It was as if something of his own metal had been welded into his father's being, hardened and tempered with painstaking care.

When the shot sounded from across the wide, dusty street, it was characteristic of old Job Brandon that he didn't look up from his work. But young Eb saw the three riders before the bank, each with a bandanna covering his face and he saw another masked man back out of the bank, pistol spitting through the door. Then old Job acted. He peered across, wiped his hands on his leather apron, walked deliberately to his old thirty calibre Marlin, stood beside the door and took careful aim.

At his shot, the foremost rider, just reaching for the leather money pouch, threw his hands high in the air and pitched from his saddle into the dust-rutted street.

Almost at the same instant another man edged around to the side of the smithy. He crouched for a moment near the wide-open door, his cold green eyes peering from between low-pulled black hat and faded red bandanna at old Job. Young Eb for the moment, stood frozen, taking in all that, noticing the blue-steel Smith & Wesson with a pair of standing broncs carved on the grips.

It happened then, so swiftly, so horribly, that old Job didn't have time to heed his son's cry of warning. The muzzle of the Smith & Wesson blazed, and Job Brandon dropped his rifle, started to turn around, then, like a man very tired, he pitched headlong to the hard-packed ground.

Frantically, Eb reached his skinny arm for his father's rifle, just as another shot crashed from the bandit's pistol. Eb felt the searing pain of the slug as it lanced his hip. Then merciful darkness closed down. . . . He didn't know then that the killer sent three more bullets into the two bodies as they lay there. . . .

Eb Brandon missed his dad's funeral. He missed watching the dust-covered, discouraged posse slog in after a fruitless ten-days' hunt in the badlands for Pine Hill's Bunch. But the crippled Eb Brandon heard these things, and he remembered them, just as he remembered the man with the cold cat-green eyes and the fancy Smith & Wesson.

Six months passed, and the raid on Andora had simmered down to second-hand news. A year more, and Eb, with his fondness for horses, had gotten himself a job in the livery stable. A man with one crippled leg and with a bullet-shattered gun-hand doesn't make a very good smith, nor yet a good cowboy.

Eb had been at the livery stable for five

years before he met the man with green eyes. He wasn't wearing the fancy Smith & Wesson—at least where Eb could see it. Eb wanted to take out his own gun and shoot him down, but Eb wasn't a murderer. . . . However, he couldn't ever forget those cold, pitiless eyes that seemed to flicker without any life at all.

This man had them.

He'd ridden up, this stranger, leisurely enough, but his horse was sweated and the fellow himself had been hitting the trail pretty hard. He stabled the roan horse, took the rig and his weighted alforjas to a corner of the stable. Then he went back to his horse. "I been havin' some trouble with this off-front foot. You got a vet around here—or maybe some old horseshoer could do the trick."

"Mebbe I could help you," said Eb. "Let's see. . . ."

He held a lantern over the foot, squatted down. And just as he squatted, he glanced up and saw the gent carried three guns—one on either hip and a bigger one in a shoulder hideout under his coat.

"I'll take yore mount over to the smithy, and fix up this, *poco tiempo,*" said Eb Brandon. "Looks like a shoe's loose."

"Make it damn *poco tiempo,*" said the man.

EB LED the roan over to the blacksmith shop. He worked on him for a while, then came back.

The dust of his passing faded away in the moonglow. Eb was turning back to the stable, when he heard the rapid beat of horse's hoofs coming down the road. He wasn't much surprised when Sheriff Proctor from over at Tenstrike dismounted from a badly blown mount. His posse was with him. All of them showed signs of hard riding.

The green-eyed gent was the man they were after. He'd robbed a bank at Tenstrike and killed three men.

"Leave me ride with you, sheriff," said Eb.

The sheriff shook his head. Maybe there was some head money on the bank-robber and the lawman was afraid that Eb would want a split. Anyway, he refused in emphatic terms.

"He can't be so far ahead," said the sheriff to his men. "We'll blow the hosses while we have a drink. C'mon."

Eb waited until they were out of sight. Then he took a battered old Marlin off the stable wall. He saddled up his own black gelding, with the left stirrup a foot shorter than the other, and rode.

Eb pounded along for two hours, then got down and looked at the sign in the road. He wasn't much surprised. He left his horse, and grabbed his rifle and started cautiously ahead on foot. Just above, half-hidden in the pinon and scrub at the trailside, was an old cut-off, that didn't lead to much of anywhere. Eb worked his way in the brush parallel to the cut-off, stopping to listen every now and then.

When he heard the sound of a man walking, he fired; high, let out a yell, and then lay still. He lay there, with his old Marlin cocked and ready, waiting for someone to come over and investigate. Pretty soon there was a cautious crackle in the undergrowth and a pistol barrel glinted in the moonlight. The steel shone blue, but on the over-sized grips, the sheen of a polished design glittered—the head of a standing bronc.

Eb's rifle crashed just as that Smith & Wesson spurted flame, but Eb was rolling even as he rifle fired. The fancy gun dropped; the brush crackled where the man fell. Then everything was still.

It was hard work for Eb to drag the dead man back to his horse, then to catch the renegade's limping mount. By the time he'd done that, Sheriff Proctor and the posse had arrived.

"How the hell did you know that Piney Hill would take this cut-off?" Proctor wanted to know.

"How many horses you think I shoed when I was helpin' my old man?" returned Eb Brandon. "This killer wanted me to go over an' fix his horse's off-front shoe. I did—but not the way he wanted. I figgered about how far he'd get before my fixin' would start to take effect."

The sheriff grunted, "Looks like you make a better posse by yourself than all the lawdogs in the country. Stove up or not, Eb, there's a deputy badge waitin' for yuh, if you'll take it."

Eb Brandon, the crippled stableman, couldn't ever fulfill his old ambition of riding range. But it didn't stop him from becoming, in later years, the best lawman and manhunter ever to bring glory to that part of the West!

RIDE THE MAN

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

The kid rode out his gunsmoke trail, looking for a man too fast to hang, too slow to crawl —and too devil-born to die!

THE mild little man who sat beside him on top of the crowded stage coach kept prodding him. "You don't want nobody to see you, that it, young fella? That why you ain't riding in the bronc-busting contest tomorrow?"

Bat Ballard shook his head.

"Ain't got the two dollars entry fee, maybe?" the man persisted. "I'll lend it to you. I'll give it to you and get it back betting on you to win. You look like a rider to me."

"Thanks."

"What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't say."

The swaying Concord bus lunged heavily as the four-team lugged it through the rocks up Dead Man's hill. Bat Ballard looked up to the top of the hill and wished the man beside him would stop prying.

Sure he could ride a bronc, and likely come off with some prize money, but he hadn't come on this trip to ride horseflesh. He'd come to see a man—a man named Lomez.

For a long time, Bat Ballard had been promising himself a trip back to Escalonte, but the fuzz on his face had taken a long time to develop into hair that would make a thick enough stubble to disguise him a little. Even then, he'd hated to go riding into the little border town in the open sunlight of a quiet day, when all eyes would be on strangers. Now, however, the rodeo was on in Escalonte, and a man could come into town with all the other strangers and stand a good chance of not being recognized.

The four sweating horses reached the top of the hill and instantly the trail dropped steeply on the opposite side. As they fishtailed down the slope, the rear wheel brake shoes began grinding and screeching on the wide iron tires. The red-faced driver barked at the team and held in the reins. The coach wound on down the steep hill until the road leveled a bit and they could look down into the main street of the border town.

Men ran out into the street and a couple of guns went off. Someone yelled, "Here comes the stage now!"

The horses quivered, knowing what was coming better than the new passengers. There was a tense moment until they rounded the turn beside the low rimrock, then the driver slapped the reins and let out a yell. "Get down there, you four-legged devils! Run your legs off!"

He held them just taut enough to save a stumbler. The horses broke like kids at play after school. They galloped down the trail and into the main street.

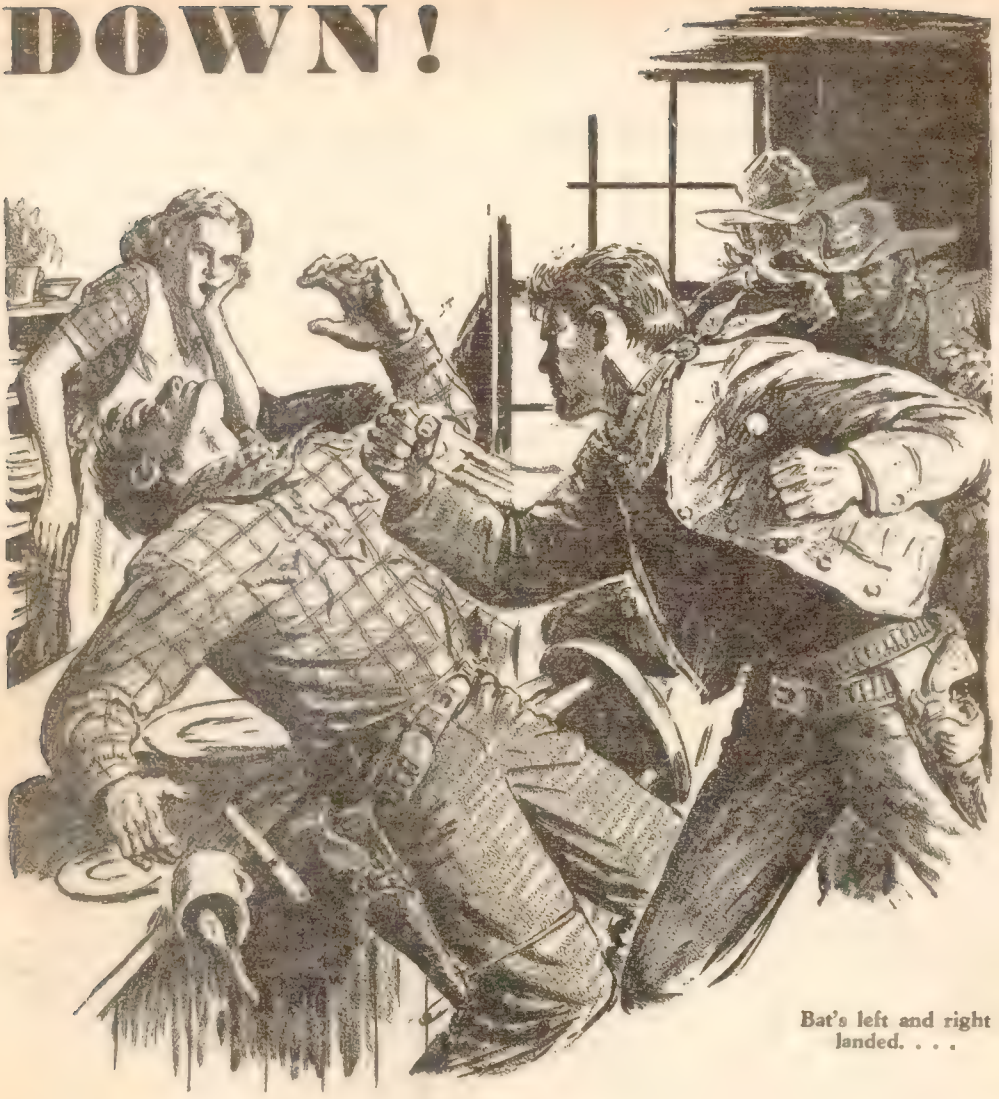
The crowd was gathered in front of the National Hotel. Across the street stood the Bonanza Saloon, and the crowd stretched from the hotel, blocked the street and thickened again under the lean-to porch that shaded the customers of the Bonanza, who were lounging outside on the board walk between drinks.

The sun glinted on the silver star of Sheriff Platt, who stood just outside his little office up the street. Bat's eyes ran swiftly over the faces before the Bonanza Saloon. Out of all those faces, one stood out. Lomez stood there with his flowing black tie, his high-peaked black hat and his brightly colored, brocaded vest.

He was as dapper, as sure, as smug looking as ever. He had the same twisted smile on his face as four years ago, when he had given Bat Ballard his ultimatum. Bat had been living with that facing him—with the hate of it all in his heart ever since.

Bat had grown since then. His shoulders were broader and he wore a man's stubble, thick enough, he hoped, so that nobody, not

DOWN!



Bat's left and right landed. . . .

even Mary Toller would know who he was.

Bat Ballard had left a frightened kid. Now he was back a man, and he knew how to handle those sixguns he wore.

Four years is a long time for a man to hate himself, for the hatred of one's self, when justified, can be a terrible thing.

Bat Ballard looked at Lomez now and knew they must face each other before his torment would end. His eye caught the small handle of Lomez' over-and-under, twin-barrelled derringer, and the fear that he had known when he'd left town four years ago came back to him. That derringer had killed at least one man a year since Bat could remember. Lomez never let a man argue a point in a card game. The man with the fastest draw won the argument.

Bat Ballard shifted his eyes to the rest of the town. It looked about the same as when he'd run out, that night after his last talk with Mary Toller, only now there was bunting strung on the various buildings. Red, white and blue bunting it was.

They hadn't had any bunting or flags flying when Bat Ballard had sneaked out four years ago, like a whipped pup.

His eyes suddenly focused on a doorway and froze there. The four team had been yanked down, and men were shouting to acquaintances on top or inside the coach. The men were getting down, all about Bat. He

sat staring at the girl standing in the doorway of the one restaurant in town. It was Luke Yancey's lunch room, fixed up some and widened on one side with a yellow-boarded addition. The girl in the doorway, the girl with the apron on, was brown-haired, brown-eyed Mary Toller.

Bat Ballard saw her expression change. He was sure that she recognized him, in spite of the stubble on his face. She was looking straight at him and almost smiling. Even at that distance, Bat was sure the girl recognized him as easily as he recognized her.

Suddenly her expression changed. She shifted her eyes for an instant, then she turned without looking back at him and went into the lunchroom.

The little man who had been prodding Bat all the way up from Holister Junction said, "Get down, young fella. What you staring at—a ghost?"

"Yeah," Bat Ballard said. He slipped to the ground, his high heels burrowing deep into the dust.

"Like I said on the way up," the man said. "I'll stake you to the entry fee in the bronc-busting contest if you'll enter. I know a rider when I see one. I'll lay money on you if—"

Bat Ballard turned his back on the man. The man called after him, "My name's Charlie Dixon. I'll be staying at the National Hotel if you change your mind."

Bat didn't bother to turn back or to acknowledge the announcement. He plowed through the dust of the road.

Little Charlie Dixon was yelling at him again. Bat didn't take time to look over the mass of men well as they stood before the Bonanza. He wasn't sure whether Lomez was still standing where he'd been. But Bat did catch in the corner of his eyes little Charlie Dixon running through the dust of the street after him.

"Hey, you with the straw thatch. You, young feller! I know where I seen you ride. I know what made me figure you was built like a rider. It was up at a rodeo up Laramie way. Last year, wasn't it?"

Bat Ballard turned. The little old buzzard might even remember his name and shout it out in the street—for Lomez or the sheriff to hear.

"Sure you're the same! Best damn bronc rider I ever laid eyes on, you was. And you must be better now. You ought to come off with the championship of this jerkwater town without half trying. Hey, your name is—"

Bat Ballard caught him by the arm.

By now there wasn't a lounger along the rail or the bench beneath the Bonanza veranda that wasn't pricking up his ears to hear that name.

Bat held tight to Charlie Dixon's arm, hard enough to choke him if the hand were on Dixon's throat. He half dragged Charlie Dixon up the street and now everybody up and down the street was watching and listening for more talk.

"Hey, stop trying to break my arm," Dixon said.

"I'll break it in two if you don't shut that mouth of yours." Because everybody was staring and listening, Bat Ballard ducked Charlie Dixon into the first public place they came to. It happened to be Luke Yancey's lunchroom.

There weren't many in the lunchroom. Three cowhands on stools along the middle and two tough looking customers down at the far end of the counter. Mary had just brought them plates of food and had turned away. She looked at Bat Ballard, froze for an instant, then went into the kitchen.

"What's the idea of rushing me in here?" Dixon wanted to know.

Bat Ballard didn't hear him. He was staring at the curtained door that led into the kitchen.

"Hey," Charlie Dixon said, suddenly. "I reckon I was wrong. I forgot that you was hiding out here in town, or trying to."

The two tough looking men at the far end straightened. The nearest cowhand turned his head. Then all five turned and looked at Bat Ballard and Dixon.

"I'm not hiding out," Bat Ballard said, loud enough for all to hear. Nothing would be gained by having folks think he was trying to hide.

Now that Mary felt the way about him that she seemed to feel, it didn't matter a great deal what happened. Maybe the sooner things between him and Lomez came to a head, the better. But he'd figured it out as better all around if he had a chance to watch as a stranger until he found out how the land lay.

Four years ago, when he'd been a kid in Escalonte, he had done a little cattle driving across the border for Lomez. He hadn't known the cattle didn't rightfully belong to

Lomez. There'd been some hot words when the kid had nearly been caught in a rustler's trap, and Lomez had forced the kid to move on, threatening him.

Mary Toller had advised Bat to leave town. He and Mary had been pretty close, it seemed to him, growing up together on her mother's ranch as they had.

But since then the fact that he'd run from Lomez, even after Lomez had called him a rat, had festered in Bat Ballard's young brain until he couldn't stand it any longer.

Now he was back and it seemed best not to spread the news.

With the five customers still staring at him, Bat repeated, "Where you come from, everybody must figure a man growing a beard is hiding out." Then Bat forced a laugh. "Me, I'm just growing this beard because my girl says I look handsomer in a beard."

Mary came out of the kitchen at that moment. She brought coffee and set it down before the three cowhands. They turned from staring at Bat to look at the girl.

"You coming out to see me ride tonight, sweetheart?" the tall, redheaded ranny asked Mary.

She paused before him and her eyes were steady on him. "Maybe. What time you riding?" She shot a challenging glance at Bat Ballard.

The blocky cowhand beside the redhead said, "Red's starting the show off in an hour, riding a sunfisher around the stockade to show the leather pullers how to sit a horse."

Red grinned. He reached out and caught Mary's wrist. "You'll be there, eh, sweetheart?"

She tried to twist her arm away. The others laughed. Red twisted her arm the other way. He said, "Promise you'll be there wishing me luck and I'll let you go."

Mary's face was red. Her free hand lashed out like a whip and the smack she gave the redhead echoed from the yellow rafters of the lunchroom. The redhead leaned farther, twisted her arm harder.

A human thunder bolt leaped down the line of stools. The redhead's two comrades tried to get in and block the attack before Bat Ballard could enter the party, but they were too late.

BALLARD'S left hand closed over the hard left shoulder of the redhead and he spun the man around. Red dropped his hold on Mary's wrist and turned, throwing his fist as he came around.

Another smack made the rafters shudder. Bat Ballard tried to duck the surprise blow, shook his head as it bounced off his temple. He let go and threw his left and then his right. They both landed.

The redhead staggered back, crashed against the counter and the coffee cups clattered.

The girl screamed, "Look out, Ba—" She didn't finish the name.

Ballard saw the shapes rushing him. The stocky pal of the redhead and the big man with the beard were charging. He threw his right again, landing on the big man, but they kept coming in.

Something locked Bat Ballard's arms behind him. He tried to break free. Someone was yelling behind him. The voice of the thickest ranny was bellowing for Red to come in and finish him off while they held his arms.

Mary grabbed a pan and let it fly and threw another. In the excitement, Bat broke and began throwing punches again.

The door swung wide and a man barked, "Reach, you gamecocks!"

Sheriff Platt was a big man with arms the size of most men's legs. He glanced about, focused on Mary. "What happened, Mary?"

She nodded at the redhead. "He got smart with me and this one—" she nodded at Bat, "—he took my part."

Platt looked at the redhead. "Reckon you're Red Carter, the hot bronc buster in the rodeo."

The stocky one said, "Best rider in the world, Red is."

Sheriff Platt jerked his head toward the door. "Get out, the three of you. And don't give me any more trouble."

The sheriff waited till they'd moved on. He glanced at Bat Ballard. "Haven't I seen you before?"

"I wouldn't know," Bat said.

"Face looks familiar," the sheriff said. He shrugged his big shoulders, turned toward the door, paused to scratch his head, looked back at Bat. He went out then and closed the door behind him.

Mary came over. "The beef stew's the best," she said, avoiding Bat's eyes now. She seemed to be watching the two at the other end of the counter.

"Two beef stews," Charlie Dixon said. "My treat."

She nodded, turned to the kitchen, passed through the door and the curtains waved as she came out again. "Anything else for you gentlemen?" She was talking to the tough looking pair.

The big fellow shook his head. He paid and they got up and went out. The smaller of the two paused to glance at Ballard, then he joined the other one outside.

"Thanks for throwing them pans," Bat said. "I'd have stood a good chance if the sheriff hadn't come in."

Mary glanced at Dixon again, decided she could say more. "Thanks for taking my part," she said. "I couldn't do less after you'd come over to help me."

Bat Ballard turned to Charlie Dixon. He wanted to tell him to vamoose for a while so he could talk to Mary alone, but there wasn't a chance. Three other men were coming in.

Bat Ballard started. The man in the lead was Lomez. He was a smallish man, dapper, quick as lightning, steady, calm.

Lomez came in with his hands in his pockets, holding back his long black coat and showing the ugly little derringer in his belt. Diamond rings sparkled on his fingers.

Now Bat noticed the two men with him. They were the two who had gone out a few minutes ago. They stood behind Lomez like two bodyguards, or maybe they were merely informers, but their guns were plenty handy to their fingertips.

Lomez' dark eyes were boring through Bat's face, trying to see behind the stubble. But there was no sign of recognition on his poker face. Lomez said, "I heard you're quite a fighter."

"Did you?" Bat Ballard said. He felt Mary standing by the draped door, watching, listening.

"And the best rider in the country." Lomez nodded to Dixon. "Ain't that what you said, stranger?"

Dixon was calmer than Bat had expected. He laughed in Lomez' face. "You must have overheard a mistake I made. I thought this one was somebody else."

"I don't fool that easy," Lomez said. "You didn't ride the coach top all the way up here next to this kid for nothing. What's your game?"

The place was still, then there was a soft, padding sound as Mary came over, carrying two big, thick plates of beef stew.

"No game," Dixon said. "Just a mistake, like I tell you. That's all, friend."

Mary paused with the beef stew. She lowered it slowly, set it on the counter before the two men.

"I'm warning you," Lomez said. He raised his eyes, looking at Mary. He said, "Get out in the kitchen where you belong."

She hesitated, glanced at Bat Ballard. Bat acted as if he hadn't heard. His eyes were on the guns of the two men behind Lomez.

"Go on," Lomez barked at the girl. She turned and went into the kitchen.

Lomez lowered his voice. He was looking at Bat Ballard.

"I'm giving you warning," Lomez said. "Don't enter the bucking contest. If you do it'll be the last ride you'll take."

Lomez turned then and walked between his two bodyguards and out the door. Bat sat studying his beef stew.

Charlie Dixon was already eating. He laughed, low. He said, "Well, now we know the bucking championship contest is fixed and they don't want you riding in it. I shoulda kept my big mouth shut coming across the street." He gobbled at his stew.

Bat poked at his, took a bite. It didn't taste good. Nothing would taste good the way he felt. He'd turned up yellow with Lomez telling him where to head in.

Charlie took a swig of his coffee, slammed the heavy cup down hard. "By thunder, we'll show 'em. And we'll clean up, too. We'll show him and his gunslicks they can't scare us—won't we?"

Bat Ballard nodded his head slow because Mary was in the kitchen doorway. He couldn't do anything else. But his hand that held his fork with a cube of beef on it shook as he lifted it to his mouth.

Charlie Dixon gulped the last of his coffee and wiped his mouth. "We'll show 'em." He nudged Bat as he got up. He laid some money on the counter and nodded to Mary.

They were alone. She came over to him. "Bat," she said. "You aren't going to ride—are you?"

Bat raised his eyes. He wished he could tell her how it seemed to be. He was glad to take on the redhead and his two pals, but to fight Lomez with gunfire, that was something else.

"I'll ride," he said in a quick, barking voice. "I'll ride and I'll win."

Mary looked white. She was shaking her

head. "You mustn't," she said. "Lomez will find an excuse to kill you. I overheard the fix on the busting betting. Nobody much knows it, but Lomez has the redhead fixed so he'll throw the contest. Lomez is betting everything on a stranger from up north called Ringo."

A steady thudding began along the board walk outside the lunch room. The crowd was moving up toward the rodeo park.

"A lot you'd care what was to happen to me," Bat said. "And I don't blame you. I ran like a yellow dog with my tail between my legs last time. I know you advised me to get out, but I've been living in hell since. Now you're asking me to do what Lomez tells me again."

Mary's face was tinted crimson. She said, "I don't want to see anyone killed."

"That's what I figured," Bat said.

"Why should I care particularly about you?" she said in a strained voice.

"I figured that was how you felt." He stood up. "You recognized me on the bus top didn't you?"

"I'd know your eyes anywhere," she said. "And you."

His expression changed. "Think the sheriff recognized me?"

"If you mean over that cattle driving over the border when you were a kid, it wouldn't make any difference now."

Bat glanced momentarily out of the window.

"Lomez is just as dangerous as when you left four years ago," Mary said. "Maybe more dangerous. I'm asking you not to ride in the rodeo."

Bat Ballard looked steadily down into the frightened face of Mary Toller. "I don't understand you, Mary."

"What don't you understand?"

"You turned me down when I came into town just now. You been cold to me since. Not that I blame you. I didn't expect you'd be glad to see a coward come back. But I don't figure, if that's how you feel, why you're so interested in saving my gizzard from Lomez' bullets this time."

"I've always felt the same about you," she said. "But I was never one to want to stay where I wasn't wanted."

"Who says I don't want you?"

"You never said you did. You stayed away four years without saying a word."

"That was because I didn't figure I had the right. I figured a coward shouldn't be making up to a wonderful girl—like you."

She stared at him steadily and her mouth opened slowly. "You—really felt like that?"

"Sure," he said. "What else did you think?"

"Bat—darling," she said.

He came around the corner and caught her in his arms. They held tight, Mary saying, "Bat, darling," over and over.

The door opened but they didn't seem to hear. Charlie Dixon came barging in saying, "Well, I got your riding this afternoon all fixed. I paid the entry fee and I—"

Bat Ballard released Mary and turned. "You what?"

"I got you enrolled and the fee paid," Charlie grinned. "Everythings going to be fine. We'll clean up half the money in the county. Folks are all betting with Lomez. We'll make a clean sweep and split the winnings."

"Bat," Mary said. "Listen to me. You can't ride, do you hear me? We've got more to live for, now that I've got you back. We'll get a little ranch and go somewhere and we'll settle down and—"

"Hey," Charlie Dixon said. "Not till this bucking contest is over. I got every nickel I own in the world bet on you, Bat Ballard. Lucky I recollected your name to tell the enrollment folks. Come on. You got to get out there. The ruckus is about to start."

Bat Ballard squared his shoulders. He said, "I'll say it is." He gave his sixguns a hitch. With Mary declaring her love—with a bright future ahead of him now, he had his name to clear for good and all.

The clump of the four boots echoed hollowly as Bat Ballard and Charlie Dixon walked out of the lunch room and turned, walking with the mob outside, toward the rodeo park.

THE grand stand that had been set up for the rodeo was packed full of ranchers and strangers, visitors, and whole families in groups and men standing down in front close to the board fence.

Off across the riding park were the chutes, two on either side of a judges' stand in the middle.

Sitting in a special box in front of the grandstand, Lomez sat with a party of gunslick gamblers, dressed in their flashiest for the occasion.

The afternoon sun was hot and a breeze blowing across the park sent little spirals of

dust circling lazily upward into the air.

Sheriff Platt had climbed into the judges' stand and now he took a big megaphone with a handle on the bottom and welcomed all the visitors to the rodeo park. He said, "Ladeez and gents! You are going to see this afternoon the doggondest heap of wild riding that you ever dreamed about in your worst mightmare! And to start off the show, Red Carter, reputed to be the best bronc buster in this whole south country, will attempt to ride Hell's Angel, the meanest, most ornery critter this side of the Pacific Coast! Watch chute number two!"

There was stillness, then a squeal, a snort and a bang as Hell's Angel lashed out and crashed hooves into the pen wall. Red Carter was sliding over from the fence to the bronc's back. Cowpokes were crowding the blindfolded angel tight to the gate. The gate opened and Red Carter shot out on the beast Hell's Angel went wild.

Red sat the angel easily, balanced light, pitched and flopped with the motion of the bucking beast, then pitched off in an easy sprawl right up by the corner of the fence.

Sheriff Platt scowled at the exhibition. He turned and said something to the three judges behind him, got the time, and bellowed announcement of the time through his megaphone.

Bat looked over at the stand at the box where Lomez had been sitting. Lomez wasn't there now.

A second rider shot out of a chute and was thrown, and another rider came charging out fifteen minutes after that and did fairly well.

Suddenly Bat heard movement behind him. He looked around. Lomez was there. "I thought there was something familiar about you, Ballard. So you came back when I told you not to?" Lomez said.

The jitters were grabbing Bat again. He tried to sit easy and keep calm. "I'm back," he said, and then he threw discretion out of the park, because now was the time if ever. "I'm back and what are you going to do about it, Lomez?"

"You'll hang for cattle stealing," Lomez said.

"Then I'll have a gent named Lomez hanging along beside me."

Lomez frowned. He said, "We'd do better working together, Ballard. You figuring on going through with this contest, to win?"

Bat nodded. "I'm going to win," he said.

Lomez glanced about. Another horse had burst from a chute and all eyes were on him. He raised a big roll of bills toward Bat Ballard. "This is your last chance to keep on living," Lomez said. "This says you don't win."

"You crooked skunk," Bat said. "Get out of here before I cram your brains down your throat." Lomez' pale face whitened.

"I'll kill you for this," he said.

"You're welcome to try any time," Bat said. His hands crept to his sides as he saw Lomez' hand move. Then he realized that he'd taken off his guns and left them at the stable, where he'd left his jacket and his bed roll.

"Lomez," Sheriff Platt bellowed. "What the devil you doing talking to a rider during a contest?"

"Just giving him encouragement," Lomez said. He turned away and headed back for his box. Bat watched him go. The sheriff waited a moment, studying Lomez. He raised the megaphone to his lips and his voice bellowed through the big, horn shaped speaking aid. "Ladeez and Gents! The next rider in the contest is Ringo."

The name struck a memory in Bat's brain. It was Mary who had mentioned Ringo. This was the unknown rider that Lomez had brought down to win.

Ringo was a little man with a dark head like a bullet and a body that looked like solid muscle knots. He sat the wild mustang light and easy as a flea on a thickhaired dog, and the horse charged straight across the park, headed for the stand, turned sharp, pulled a sunfish and came lunging back. In the middle of the park, the horse lit on his front legs, head down by his belly, fishtailed to the side and Ringo slid, lost his balance and sprawled to the dust.

The sheriff read the time. It had everything beat so far. One of the handlers jerked on Bat Ballard's blue dungaree leg. He said, "You're up next. Second chute over."

The sheriff's voice was bellowing again. He said, "Ladeez and gents! We got a little surprise, at least to me. One of our own boys is back. Most of you that's lived here recollect Bat Ballard. Watch chute three, folks. Bat Ballard is coming out on Wildcat."

Wildcat was a stallion. They held him blindfolded and Bat Ballard got on his back. The horse was as deadly as his name, with a snake body and legs thick and solid.

He broke in a wild leap, slammed Bat against the gate, half lost his balance, and then, as if he were as angry at himself as at the man on his back, went crazy.

The giant beast began a series of straight bucks that carried him and his tamer straight across the park. He turned, screamed and went charging for the other end. He stopped as Ringo's horse had stopped.

A rider must outguess his bucking beast. Bat had outguessed Wildcat. He was ready when the stop came; he took it easily. When the bucking began again, he forked the stallion easily.

The Wildcat squealed at Bat raked him with a spur. He sunfished, caught his balance, spun a full circle and went charging for the stands again.

Bat, holding the halter rope, yanked him toward the box where Lomez was sitting. He yelled at Lomez as he passed and saw the white fury on the man's face.

The crowd had gone mad. Two pickup riders were running their horses across the field toward him. That meant he'd won. He'd outstayed the others.

The pickup riders wedged the stallion over, caught his halter hope and there, before the chutes, Bat Ballard slipped off him.

MEN WERE clapping him on the back. He was the champion of the entire border country. The sheriff was trying to make the announcement official above that roaring of the crowd.

Charlie Dixon came from somewhere. He shouted, "You earned more money than you figured there was in the world! We split, remember. Wait till you hear how much!"

Charlie Dixon said, "I'll collect the bets and meet you at the hotel for dinner."

"I'll be there as soon as I pick up my stuff at the stables," Bat said. He hurried off. Kids followed him. Men yelled congratulations as he worked his way around the park, back to the stables.

Then he was suddenly alone, buckling on his guns and throwing his jacket over his steaming shoulders.

A voice sounded from outside. Lomez said, "I'm coming in to get you like I said, Ballard."

Bat turned a little, letting his jacket drop so he could move fast. Lomez was coming at him, still a little way off. He was waiting until he'd be close enough to use his twin-barrelled derringer. "You dirty skunk," he said. "I should have killed you four years ago."

"It would have been a heap easier then than now," Bat said.

"I'm still young enough to finish you," Lomez said. His hands moved closer to his gun.

Bat was ready when he saw Lomez' hands move like lightning.

The flame barked from the upper barrel of the derringer before Bat Ballard could get his twin guns up out of their holsters to shooting level. He'd been sure that Lomez would draw and shoot before him. He didn't doubt his own aim.

He was falling when the derringer went off. He felt the burn in his shoulder. It half spun him, even as he fell. He lay in a heap, trying to bring his gun around with his good right hand.

He heard Lomez cursing him. Then Bat moved suddenly, raised his gun and pulled the trigger.

His gun and the second barrel of the derringer went off at the same time. He felt the shock of his own gun exploding, felt the air from the derringer ball racing over his head, saw Lomez clutch his middle and go forward on his knees.

When things came clear again, he was in a bed and he could hear Mary's voice saying, "You're going to be all right, Bat darling. The doctor has the bullet out of your shoulder and I'm going to take care of you."

He looked up at her. She was smiling at him.

"Where am I?"

"In the hotel room that Mr. Dixon rented for you. I'll be right next door if you need me."

"There's no hurry about leaving just now," he said. He studied her face, brushed her cheek lightly with his good hand. "You look like you're worried about something."

She hesitated. "Bat. In the lunch room you said—about those whiskers—"

Bat Ballard laughed easily. "That was just to kid you, because you'd been kind of cold to me."

"I was hoping so," she said. "But just to make sure, I've got a pair of shears here and a razor. I'm sure I'll like you better without whiskers. Do you mind?" She began snipping at him with the shears.

"Whatever you say," Bat grinned. "Reckon I better be getting used to doing what the boss lady says." ✪ ✪ ✪

A faint rustle in the underbrush ahead turned him rigid.

CHAPTER ONE

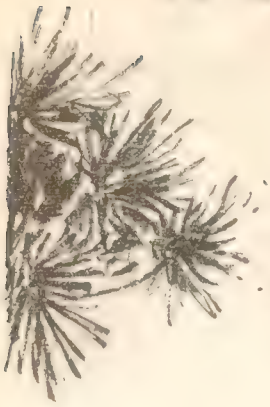
Ambush

THE sound of two shots drifted down from the hills and ranged lazily above the valley's dusty floor. Lieutenant Pringle drew rein. His eight troopers bunched loosely behind him staring off at the green and brown ridges.

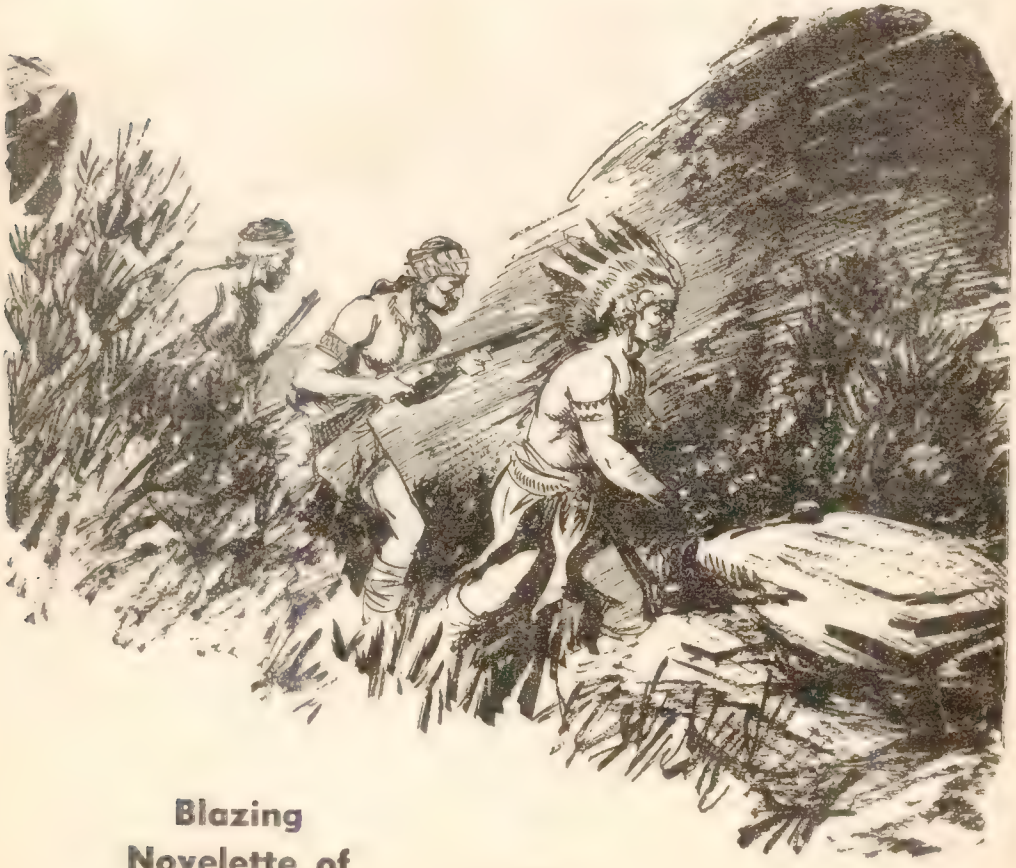
Sergeant Ben Hardy shifted his weight stiffly to the other stirrup and watched the lieutenant. A few months away from the Point, Lieutenant Pringle still sat with cadet erectness as his field glasses swept the rising tiers of hills. His uniform was meticulous from polished boots to wide-brimmed hat.

Hardy thought, *He's in trouble and too*

WHEN IT RAINED RED ARROWS!



The young lieutenant had made a mistake, and somebody'd sold out to the Sioux . . . so Sergeant Ben Hardy and his gallant troop rode into one end of a flaming hell, where the only exit was death!



Blazing Novelette of Indians on the Warpath

By MORGAN LEWIS

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damned stiff-necked to admit it to anyone.

Lieutenant Pringle lowered his glasses and barked, "Sergeant!"

Ben Hardy came up beside him and the lieutenant laid a cold, blue glance upon his face. "What do you think those shots meant?"

"It could be," Hardy answered expressionlessly, "that Tolley and Wilks have run into trouble."

Lieutenant Pringle kept his eyes on Hardy's face a half second longer, searching for signs of criticism. Then he turned his head away, his glasses sweeping the hills. Suddenly, they stopped and centered on a spot where the march of underbrush halted at the valley's edge.

But Hardy, with naked vision, had already seen—a mounted man, streaking out from the shelter of the timber. The rider was bent low over his mount's neck and the animal's hoofs sent up puffs of dust as he straightened out in a long, swinging run.

Hardy moved back to where the troopers lounged wearily in their saddles. They had done thirty miles of hard riding since sunup and the marks of it showed plainly upon them. They were good men, many of them serving their second enlistment, and now they eyed Hardy with speculation in their glances.

They didn't know, as Hardy did, that Lieutenant Pringle had exceeded his orders in coming this far—but a half-formed sense of trouble was slowly shaping within them.

"What's up?" Jim Lacey asked in a low voice.

Hardy shrugged. "We'll know as soon as Tolley gets here." He wheeled his gray cavalry horse in a half circle and watched the oncoming scout. At least the lieutenant had been wise enough to send Tolley and Wilks to scout ahead of them, he told himself.

Tolley's big, long-legged mule was coming at a pace any of the horses in the troop would have trouble equaling. Hardy's gaze scoured the hills in back of the scout, but he saw no signs of movement. Yet, there must be something back there to make Tolley burn up mule flesh that way.

The sergeant knew little of the finer points of strategy as they were taught at West Point, but he knew much about Indians, having gained his experience at first hand in twelve years of soldiering. Those years, served out on the borderline between the settlements and the vast Indian territory to the west, had toughened him, physically and mentally, so that now he could watch Tolley racing toward him and not feel his pulse beat increase one jot. If your superior officer, either through ignorance or conceit, got you in a tight place, you fought your way out—or you died. That was soldiering. The Army had started to teach him that lesson when he had enlisted at the age of eighteen and the Army was still at it.

If Tolley was bringing word of trouble, this flat valley floor was no place to make a stand. Steep, wooded hills rolled down on all sides. The troopers had entered through a narrow gash at the foot. Near the head was a weather-beaten house of a homesteader, certainly empty now—for this Indian trouble was of long standing. Save for that, there was no place within this perimeter of hills that would offer shelter.

Lieutenant Pringle sat his McClellan stiffly in advance of his men, arms folded across his chest, the very picture of what a young officer should be. Only his hand clenched beneath his arm betrayed his nervousness.

Tolley came on in a crescendo of hoofbeats, reining in the mule only a hand's breadth from the troopers. When he spoke it was directly to Hardy. "Them hills is swarmin' with Injuns," he said swiftly. "They let us in amongst 'em afore they jumped us. Wilks went down with an arrow through his chest. I run for it—damned lucky to git out wearin' my hair."

Lieutenant Pringle wheeled his horse and rode back a few steps, his face an angry red. "I'm in command here," he said sharply. "Make your report to me!"

TOLLEY was not an enlisted man; he was hired at a stipulated wage and was under no compulsion to pamper a young officer hardly dry behind the ears. "I cal'late you hear it," he said dryly, "leastwise your ears is big enough." He fished out a plug of tobacco and bit off a chew.

Pringle put a finger inside his collar as though the pressure of blood were choking him. "I'll have you discharged when we get back to the post!" he threatened furiously.

Tolley surveyed him unmoved. "You git me back to the post," he said coolly "an' I'll be glad to git fired."

His very lack of emotion checked Pringle's

rage. The lieutenant visibly got hold of himself and turned his head to Hardy. "Do you think we can get back through the pass?"

Hardy squinted up at the hills. He was too far away to pick out distinct forms, but there was a downward shifting of color beneath the surface of the trees. He shook his head.

"They're already coming down from the hills," he said. "They wouldn't do that unless they had the gap blocked. They've been watchin' us ever since we came into the valley."

The lieutenant shifted his gaze in the direction in which Hardy was gazing and for the first time he seemed to realize the hopelessness of the trap into which his rashness had led them. When he looked back at the men he was visibly shaken. "What would you suggest?" he asked without his usual assurance.

Tolley rolled his quid. "If it was me—I'd fort up in that log house up ahead and pray for a miracle."

Pringle chewed that bitter morsel for a moment's silence as he cast a wistful glance at the distant pass. "Very well, Tolley, I'll accept your suggestion." He wheeled his mount and the troopers fell in behind him.

Hardy, riding beside Tolley, felt his elbow jogged and followed the scout's pointing finger with his gaze. Horses and men were streaming out onto the plain in a wild galaxy of color and motion.

"Here they come, sir," Hardy told the lieutenant.

Pringle shot one glance at the racing horde and put spurs to his mount. The men kicked their jaded horses into a run and pounded for the house, leather creaking and accoutrements rattling.

"What kept 'em?" Hardy asked with wry humor. "I thought they'd be right on your tail."

"They was afoot when they jumped us," Tolley answered. "I reckon they had their hosses hid beyond that fust-hill."

Hardy studied them in silence. They were a good mile off and racing obliquely for the house while the troopers had only a scant half mile to go.

"It's queer," he said, "that Tug Wilson should have reported there were no signs of them. He scouted this territory three days ago."

"It's tarnation queer," Tolley said thoughtfully. "I got one look at one of their campin' places afore they jumped us an' they been here three-four days."

Hardy silently pondered this.

Tolley's big, dark-gray mule was running with his ears laid back. "Jeremiah here kin smell them Injuns," the scout said, "an' he hates 'em like pizen."

The line of Sioux warriors was gaining but not fast enough to intercept the troopers. Still the redskins were flogging their ponies forward as though it were a neck-and-neck race. As Hardy watched, the line swerved and came straight across the valley so as to cut in behind them. He jerked his eyes ahead and saw the reason for the shift.

A smaller band of braves was streaming down from the head of the valley, racing to intercept them at the log house.

The sergeant's face tightened. The troopers and this fresh band were going to meet head on in the dooryard. The troopers had already seen this fresh danger and their horses were running for all that was left in them.

THEY pounded into the yard while the Sioux were a scant hundred yards off and flung down from their mounts. There was no time and no need for volley firing. Each man dropped to his knee and worked his Spencer rifle until the entire seven shots were used.

Hardy saw Sioux saddles empty and horses go down. He picked a brave with a long headdress, riding in front, and brought him down with his second shot.

They stopped that rush at the dooryard's edge; the braves wheeling and scattering, having no stomach for such punishment.

Hardy turned to speak to the man next to him and saw he was down with a bullet through the head.

Pringle's cold blue eyes were blazing and his face was flushed with excitement at this small triumph. He was on the point of giving an order when the house door was flung open and a girl stepped out.

"Quick!" she cried. "They're coming from the other side!"

"Get into the house!" Hardy ordered, and watched the troopers crowd past the girl in the doorway. He took a swift glance around before following. The large body of Sioux that had been pursuing them were now coming up fast. The scattered members of the

band that had been dispersed were circling to meet the main body.

Tolley slapped the mule Jeremiah across the rump and watched him trot off. "They'll never lay hands on him," he growled, "'ceptin' they shoot 'im." He followed Hardy inside the building.

The log house consisted of one big room with a curtain that could be drawn to give some privacy at one end. There was a narrow window at each end and troopers had already taken their places at them.

Hardy swung shut the heavy door and slipped the stout bar into place. He took an ax from near the fireplace and began to knock out the chinking from between the walls on the far side for loopholes.

Pringle, still keyed up, was talking with the girl at the far end of the room. Hardy saw that a gray-faced man lay on a cot in the corner.

The house faced south and before Hardy had finished with the last loophole he heard the trampling rush of ponies coming up from the west end. There were shouts in the abrupt, guttural tongue of the Sioux. Lead and arrows began to thud against the logs. The twang of bow strings and the whiz of arrows served as an accompaniment to the sharp bark of rifles.

The Spencers on the west end went into action. Then the firing spread down the south side to the east and north. Hardy knew, without looking out, that the Sioux were up to their old trick of circling.

An arrow sang through the west window and took a trooper squarely between the shoulders as he was turning away to reload. The air left the man's body with a soft, gusty sigh. He dropped his rifle and took two steps forward before his knees folded

Hardy dropped the ax and ran to him. He broke off the protruding arrow head and pulled the shaft loose—but the trooper was dead.

Pringle came over and, without a word, picked up the fallen rifle and took the man's place at the window.

The sergeant tramped over to the west window where the attack seemed the heaviest, avoiding Tolley's legs as he passed. The scout had knocked out a loophole, low down, and was sprawled on his belly. His rifle was shoved through the hole and he was firing in a slow, methodical way—spaced by the even rhythm of his jaws.

HARDY passed on to the window and took the other side across from Jim Lacey. For the first time he got more than a glimpse of what was going on outside.

Sioux warriors, darkly streaked with paint, were riding in a fast moving circle about the log house. The buckskin-shod ponies were running with an easy rhythm, guided only by a line knotted about their lower jaw. The riders were naked except for a loin cloth, and they rode with an effortless skill and balance. They fired and yelled. The din was continuous and increased as more warriors streamed down from the hills and joined the circle.

It was hard to judge the numbers in a circle like that. Hardy picked out a chief astride a calico pony. When the chief came around again Hardy had counted one hundred and fifty odd. Hardy steadied his rifle against the window jam and knocked the chief off his pony.

Jim Lacey scrubbed his face with a sleeve and stepped back to reload. "They're tryin' to scare us to death with yellin'," he observed.

Hardy noticed that, despite their losses, the circle constantly became smaller as the braves drew it closer to the house. A hail of arrows and lead was thudding against the walls in a never-ending volley.

He heard a soft, choking sound like a sob and turned to see Pringle braced against the wall with a hand pressed to his chest. Blood was welling through the lieutenant's fingers and his face had gone a dark, dirty gray. His knees loosened as Hardy started for him, and he slid down against the wall into a sitting position, chin resting on his chest.

The sergeant dropped to a knee beside him and lifted the sagging head. The question on his lips remained unasked for Pringle's pain-carved face told him the answer. His cold, blue eyes had darkened and all the proud dreams of glory and honor had been wiped out by the sudden bitter knowledge that this was the end.

He gazed at Hardy and a bitter look of uncomprehending protest came into his face. He tried to speak but only a soft gurgling came. His head slipped from the sergeant's hand and dropped to his chest. When Hardy again lifted it, the lieutenant was dead.

When Jim Lacey went down with the death rattle in his throat, Hardy knew their time had about run out. To shoot, the troop-

ers must see—and to see, they must expose themselves to the Sioux. So they had gone down, one by one, with a bullet or an Indian arrow in them.

Only Hardy, Tolley, and two troopers were now alive. The Sioux had drawn closer, contemptuous of the failing fire, and were now throwing their hard, muscular bodies off their ponies and slipping close to the shelter of the walls.

Hardy knew what that meant. His ears were strained for the first sound of licking flames.

Something scraped along the logs and a warrior came halfway through the window in one wild spring. He grasped Hardy's rifle barrel as he heaved his body through the narrow opening. The sergeant stepped back, pulled his service revolver and put a bullet through the straining bronze throat.

Picking up his rifle, he saw with a start that the trooper at the opposite window had gone down and that the girl had taken his place. She stood with the rifle to her shoulder and the firm full sweep of her body showed under the thin linsey dress.

Hardy stepped quickly over to Tolley still stretched on the floor before his loophole. He touched the scout on the shoulder. "If the girl's still alive when they get in—"

Tolley nodded and levered another shell into the rifle chamber.

Hardy went back to his window. The fight had started in late afternoon and now the valley had become a bowl of shadow as the sun lowered behind the hills.

He fired at the indistinct forms. In a momentary lull he heard the sound he had been dreading—the soft rush and crackle of flame. At the same time, arrows, like flaming meteors, shot through the air and landed on the roof.

The remaining trooper suddenly cried out. Hardy wheeled and something struck him on the head and he fell without knowing he had been hit.

CHAPTER TWO

Night Passage

SERGEANT HARDY opened his eyes to darkness and overpowering heat. His head ached powerfully. He moved and slender fingers touched his lips, sealing them, while the girl's voice said, "Be still."

He felt the softness of her under his head and heard the trickle of water close by as she dipped into it. She placed a wet cloth on his forehead and almost instantly the throbbing ceased.

As his senses became fully alive his ears picked up the roar of flames — but t h e y seemed subdued, as if from a distance. He put out his hand and felt an earth wall and knew they were underground a short distance from the house, probably by an underground spring. There was a crash that rumbled t h r o u g h the blackness and he judged that would be the roof of the cabin caving in.

He had a sudden, unaccountable impulse to leap up and claw his way to the surface but he instantly controlled it. There was a dull thudding as horses passed by overhead.

He lay quiet and later heard Tolley speak to the girl—and he felt glad that the scout had pulled through.

Time dragged and the heat increased until it was like some tangible thing pressing down on the exposed parts of his body. Smoke trickled in to him and set up a burning in this nose and throat. He pulled the wet cloth over his mouth and nose to act as a filter and he fell into a troubled sleep.

The next thing he knew, Tolley was shaking him.

"Time to go, Sarge," he said.

Hardy came awake immediately and sat up. His head at once threatened to split in two. He dipped the cloth in the spring and bound it tightly about his temples.

"Git on yore hands an' knees an' foller me," Tolley said.

Hardy felt him pass into the blackness, and followed, feeling the damp, hard-packed dirt beneath his palms. He brushed against the girl in the darkness as she squeezed against the tunnel's side to let him pass.

Some ten feet further on, Tolley stopped and Hardy blundered into him, the impact sending pain hurtling through his head. He leaned against the side of the tunnel and heard Tolley's hands scraping overhead. The scout grunted and a stone scraped against earth. Fresh air and a faint light streamed in through the hole he had uncovered.

This was blocked out as Tolley lifted himself through the opening. Hardy followed—then he reached back and helped the girl through. Tolley was already flat on his belly. Hardy and the girl stretched flat on

the ground. They were in a patch of underbrush about fifty feet from the house. Walls and roof had fallen and waves of heat swept out from the white-hot embers.

Nine men had gone into that building, Hardy thought, and only two and the girl had come out. Of those that had remained, not even the bones would be left . . . only ashes.

There was a movement on his left and he saw the scout slide from the brush patch and disappear into the darkness. The girl lay near him, making no sound. The trip back to the fort would be bad enough for a man, he reflected, but it would be pure hell for a girl.

Sometime later Tolley came back. "They're gone," he said, "but I reckon they'll be back. We better skin out while we got the chance."

Hardy rose to his knees and touched the girl.

"Bend down!" Tolley said, and moved off.

They followed then out into the bunchgrass, away from the embers' glow. A thousand feet further on, Tolley halted. "These Injuns is headin' for the fort," he said. "If we go that way we'll be travelin' along with 'em. Our best bet is to hole up at the head of the valley an' hope none of 'em come that way."

"Troop A will be out this way after us," Hardy pointed out. "We've either got to get back before they start—or head 'em off before they ride into a trap." He turned to the girl's vague form. "It'll be a hard trip and a dangerous one. You'd be safer if we left you at the head of the valley. If we get through we'll come back for you."

The girl spoke for the first time since leaving the tunnel. "I'll go with you," she said firmly. "I can keep up. Besides, it would take too long to get me settled."

They started off and a black shape loomed up on their right. Hardy's gun was half out of its holster when Tolley chuckled.

"Jeremiah! I knowed they'd never catch you." He put a hand on the mule's nose. "This makes it a heap easier," he said to Hardy. "Jeremiah kin carry double. You and me'll have to take turns footin' it."

"I'll walk the first stretch," Hardy said. Tolley swung up on the mule and Hardy helped the girl up behind him.

The sergeant stepped out through the short bunchgrass with the mule following. In the dark masses of hills on either hand were points of light where the Sioux had strung their camps. They extended to where the hills dropped down at the foot of the valley.

If the pass wasn't being watched, Hardy decided, they might have a chance of getting through. After that, he didn't know. There would still be some twenty odd miles of open country. If the Sioux went back to the ruins and found the tunnel, they would be after them like a pack of wolves.

The valley floor stretched its black length before him. Hardy walked, with every swing of his flat-thighed cavalryman's legs sending shooting pains inside his head. He passed the small, twinkling fires and the big one further up on the hillside. When there were only five miles left to the pass he changed places with Tolley.

The girl had her dress hiked up around her knees and was sitting astride the mule. She put her hands on the sergeant's sides, under his arms, to steady herself.

"There was a man on a cot—" Hardy began.

"My father," the girl said. "He died—just before the lieutenant was killed."

"It's a hard thing, but it was better so."

"He didn't mind," the girl said softly. "My mother died yesterday. She had been too sick to move. That was the reason we hadn't gone to the settlements."

The sergeant, who had little use for women, felt a growing respect for this one. She had lost both parents, been through the siege of the house and had helped drag him to safety in the tunnel. Now she was facing a thirty-mile trip through Sioux-infested country, and her voice was still calm and unhurried with no hint of hysteria. He knew men who would have behaved worse.

SOME time later the mule came to a stop. "We're near the pass," Tolley said, in a low voice. On the hillside above, a fire cast its glow from behind a fold of ridge.

Hardy stepped down. Tolley led the mule into the underbrush. "You wait here," the scout said. "I'm goin' to skin up that ridge an' see what's doin'."

"You want help?" Hardy asked.

From the darkness came Tolley's low chuckle. "They could hear them cavalry boots of yourn trompin' a mile off. I kin

creep up an' git back afore you'd git to the top. I'll give an owl hoot when I'm back." Then the scout was gone.

The girl had already slid from the mule and Hardy, groping about by sense of touch, tethered him to a branch.

He heard the girl move about, and then her voice saying, "Here's a place to sit."

He found her sitting with her back against a tree and sank down beside her. He had been up and moving since dawn and fatigue was making its heavy marks upon his body He lay flat with the trooper's trick of completely relaxing no matter how short the time.

"Do you think we'll get through to the fort?" the girl asked, as calmly as though she was inquiring about the weather.

Hardy took a deep breath and felt weariness run like water through his muscles. "If we can get to Medicine Buttes before sunrise," he answered, "we'll have a chance. Let's rest."

An owl hoot floated down in the darkness from nearby. Hardy stood up and hooted once in reply. He pulled his service revolver from its holster and stood waiting with the gun in his hand.

There was no further sound until Tolley said, from a few feet away, "Where in tarnation be you?"

"Here," Hardy said, and moved his palm along the tree trunk.

Tolley came to a stop a few feet from him and the sergeant could hear his deep, regular breathing. Tolley moved closer so that his breath fanned the sergeant's cheek. "Who d'you suppose is up there harranguing 'em?" he asked very softly.

Hardy made no reply.

"Tug Wilson!" The scout spat out the name with bitter emphasis. "He's promisin' to lead the relief troop into the same trap we walked into."

Hardy felt one swift shock at the news, and then discovered that he was not surprised. It explained too many of the questions that had been lying unanswered in his mind. One point still puzzled him, and he suspected the answer to that. "Why is Wilson throwin' in with the Sioux?" he asked.

"From what I could get of his talk," Tolley said, "he claims his mother was a Sioux squaw and his daddy a white man. I reckon this white man treated his squaw wife pretty mean an' it made Tug hate all whites. He says he killed his old man soon's he got big enough an' has been fightin' for the Injuns ever since."

"And now he's going back—" interrupted Hardy—"to guide Troop A out here?"

"That's the idee," Tolley agreed. "Standin' Tree is chief of this war party an' is kinda timid about goin' up again' the fort like Wilson wants. Tug is tellin' him that if they git Troop A outa the way there won't be enough of the squadron left to keep 'em outa the fort."

Hardy stood silent. At their present rate of travel they wouldn't reach the fort in time. Someone had to take the mule and make a run for it. The sergeant weighed the situation and made his decision.

"You'll have to take the mule and try to get through."

"What about the gal?" Tolley asked.

"We'll ask her," Hardy said, and moved to where she sat. He explained the situation. "With your permission," he concluded, "I'm sending Tolley on with the mule. It puts us in a bad spot, but there's no other way out."

The girl answered without hesitation, "My life is a small thing compared to a whole troop. Of course he must go."

From what he had seen of the girl Hardy had expected her to agree but the promptness of her decision pleased him. "I'll do my best to get you through," he promised.

He moved back to the mule with Tolley. "Tell the captain not to send anyone out for us," he said. "We'll travel nights and hole up daytimes."

Tolley was busy cutting blanket pads to muffle the mule's feet. "I'll tell 'em," he said doubtfully, "but you know Captain Brady. He's likely to come bustin' out."

"Not if you tell him what he'll be riding into," Hardy said sharply. "There must be eight or nine hundred Sioux out here."

Tolley lashed the pads around the mule's hoofs and stepped into the saddle.

Hardy said, "Tell him to place Wilson under arrest as soon as he shows up."

Tolley looked up at the sky where one lone star peered through. "You'd best git started," he warned. "Them clouds is breakin' away an' the moon'll be up in a coupla hours." He held out a horny palm. "So long—an' keep your hair on."

Hardy gripped his hand and chuckled grimly. "Same to you, Tolley." He stood silent in the darkness and heard the muffled

sound of Jeremiah's hoofs fade away into the pass.

CHAPTER THREE

Medicine Buttes

TOLLEY'S prediction proved correct. The clouds broke completely away and the stars shone brightly before Hardy and the girl had completed the passage that led to the open country beyond the hills. It made the going easier but it increased the chances of being detected by scouting redskins.

They had followed the stony upgrade, passing around the larger rocks that had rolled down from the steep hillsides on either hand, moving rapidly and cautiously with frequent pauses to listen.

At the break in the grade where the trail dipped down to the plains below they paused for a breather in the black shadows of a pine. Despite the night's coolness, Hardy's shirt was damp with sweat. The girl dropped to the ground, her breath coming raggedly.

Hardy waited until her breathing had quieted. He was on the point of starting when a faint rustle in the underbrush ahead turned him rigid. He laid a warning hand on the girl.

They crouched motionless in the shadows and watched a half dozen braves file down into the pass and disappear into the opposite hillside. They crossed the trail not more than two rods from the concealing pine and the sound of their passage had been hardly noticeable.

Hardy waited long minutes before moving, then he took the girl's hand and guided her along the tree-darkened hillside, no longer trusting the trail. The footing on the sloping ground was treacherous and fallen tree trunks occasionally barred the way. Low branches swung at them with stiff fingers and pine boughs swept their faces. Hardy took this punishment for a half mile when a down pitch hid them from view of the back trail.

Here he cut back to the pass and they were able to make better time on the down grade. Hardy set a fast pace and the girl hung doggedly to his heels.

The pass spilled out onto flat prairie land. Behind them the hills lay in a gentle inward curve on either side. Hardy saw that the girl was fast tiring but he shoved on without letup, for the rising moon was making a ghostly glow behind a low ridge off to the east. When it was fully risen he wanted to be so far out on the plain that the eyes watching from the hills could not pick them out.

They moved through thick bunchgrass over a darkened plain that seemed to run on without halt or measure. A wind soughed softly across this wide desolation bringing with it the scent of sage. Overhead the stars were cold and distant with here and there a shred of cloud scudding between them and the earth.

When the moon had climbed fully free of the hills Hardy stopped. The girl at once sat down and pulled off her shoes. Then she curled up and gently rubbed her feet while the sergeant stretched full length on the ground. He kept his boots on for he doubted if he could get his feet into them again if he once took them off. Both his heels were blistered and the boots had become bands of hot iron across his toes.

Hardy rested for a few minutes and then arose. He knew the danger of letting weary muscles stiffen up. The girl put on her shoes and struggled to her feet. "Do we have to keep going?" she asked wearily. "We're out of the hills now."

"It's ten miles to Medicine Buttes," he answered. "I want to hit there by sunup."

She groaned and started off. Hardy fell in behind her, knowing it was easier to lead than follow. He had not wanted to alarm her by stressing the necessity for reaching the buttes. When the sun rose any moving thing on that vast plain would stand out clearly to the Sioux watching back in the hills. The moon had risen late and soon the grayness of dawn would tint the sky; their only hope of safety lay in reaching some place of concealment before full daylight.

The girl walked ahead of him, getting into the swing of it, and for a few miles went steadily enough. Then the soil gradually became sandy, studded with sagebrush, and shifting under their feet. Her pace became slower and Hardy noticed that she limped. It was cruel to keep her going but letting her stop would be worse.

The moon was riding high in the sky when they came to a shallow stream that cut through the sandy soil. They lay full length on the shelving bank and drank. The girl

sat up and pulled off her shoes and stockings. She put her feet in and gasped in relief as the cold water swirled around her ankles.

Hardy tugged at his boots and finally got them off. He lowered his feet into the stream and winced as the water bit into the raw spots. He let them soak until the swelling was reduced and then, still bare-footed, he started searching for a crossing. The water was not deep but the sandy bottom was treacherous. He hunted upstream until he found a deer trail that led across. He had to help the girl to her feet and grip her arm as they forded the stream.

Here they got their footgear on and the weary march was resumed. But now the major part of it was over and he could see the buttes shining ahead.

The water had refreshed the girl and with prospects of rest ahead she made better time.

The soil now was entirely sand, shifted by the wind into low mounds and hillocks. In the moonlight the irregular surface was deceptive and once the girl stumbled and went to her knees. She got up before the sergeant could help her and struggled on through the sandy waste.

THEY came over a rise and Medicine Buttes was full before them, a weird and uncanny collection of hundreds of sandstone buttes, cut and channeled by the weather into fantastic forms. They rose from fifteen to fifty feet in height, carved into caves, columns, battlements and spires.

The girl drew nearer to Hardy as they entered this scene of unearthly splendor. Moving in and around the buttes Hardy came to one that towered above the rest with a wind-carved gallery running clear to the summit.

It came to within six feet of the base. Hardy stepped on a rock and swung himself to the lowest end of the ledge. He reached down for the girl and lifted her up beside him. Then they worked up to the top of the butte, at times crawling as the rocky ledge sloped out.

They came to the summit and had a wide and uninterrupted view of the sandy plain lying like molten silver below them.

The butte was some hundred feet across at the top with an uneven surface and a scattering of pines. Hardy picked a jagged edge of rock that would serve as a windbreak and the girl went down on the sand as though she would never rise again. Hardy scooped hollows for his hips and shoulders. He put his gun and saber near at hand and as he lay down he thought that sand had never seemed so soft.

The girl was asleep. The sergeant closed his eyes as dawn tinted the eastern sky mother-of-pearl. . . .

Hardy opened his eyes to find the sun beating hotly upon his face. He lay still for a moment, locating himself, then sat up, every muscle in his body creaking woodenly.

He glanced at the spot where the girl had lain and saw only the mark of her body in the sand. He turned his head at a sound and saw her coming up from the gallery.

The night's sleep had done wonders for her. Her eyes were bright and the signs of exhaustion were gone from her face.

"There's a spring of cold water down at the base," she said, "if you want to wash up. You might as well drink your breakfast while you're there."

Hardy grinned and stood up—but the grin left his face when he put pressure on his feet. They were stiff and swollen and the movement of the boots against his raw heels was agony.

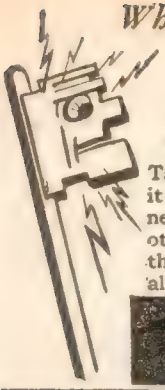
He limped to the ledge and went down it to the spring. After washing up he took off his boots and wrapped strips of cloth about his heels. He took his time about it, feeling a sense of leisure. Tolley would have reached the fort last night and made his report.

Hardy put his back against a sun-warmed ledge of rock and built a smoke. The hot sun felt good on his stiff muscles. He and the girl would wait for nightfall to complete the trip and would reach the fort tired and hungry but not much the worse for the journey.

A pebble bounced from the rock beside him and he heard the girl calling. The quick urgency in her voice lifted him to his feet. She was leaning over the edge of the butte and when he looked up she beckoned swiftly and pointed out over the plain.

He went up the ledge to the top, forgetting his aching muscles. She was kneeling at the edge in a clump of pines. She gave him a strained look and pointed wordlessly.

Hardy moved up beside her and peered through the screening branches. Out on the plain to the east a riderless animal with head down was traveling towards the buttes. But



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what tightened the muscles in the sergeant's stomach was the mounted Indian riding swiftly to overtake him.

The riderless animal came on with plodding steps, apparently not noticing his pursuer. When the Indian was a scant hundred yards off he let out a yell.

For the first time the riderless animal became aware of him. He threw up his head and broke into a trot, then a full gallop. He continued to head for the buttes and as he came closer, Hardy suddenly gave an exclamation and ducked back to where he had slept. He scooped up pistol and saber and ran for the ledge.

The girl watched him with wide eyes. "That's Tolley's mule," he said grimly.

THE sergeant crouched in the lea of a stone column, his naked saber held in both hands. He could see the Sioux, bent over his horse's neck, flogging him on in pursuit of the mule. Hardy wanted to take him with the saber if possible, for the sound of a shot would carry far.

Jeremiah came up on a gallop and swerved past the column that hid the sergeant.

Hardy heard the Indian's pony plunging through the sand hard after the mule. The sergeant glimpsed the pony's nose and took one quick step forward. He lunged straight up. The saber took the brave low down in the side and forced up through bone and muscle.

The force of the encounter tore the blade from Hardy's grasp. The pony plunged on and the brave gave his wild death cry and rolled off. The saber point must have split his heart, for he was dead when Hardy reached him.

The sergeant withdrew the blade and dragged the body into a rocky recess. Jeremiah had gone straight to the spring and now the pony joined him.

Hardy went swiftly over and took their reins. The pony lunged backward but Hardy set his heels and eventually quieted him. He tethered pony and mule and saw with a sense of shock that there was blood on the mule's saddle.

He put his hand on the dark splotches and found that they were dry and stiff; Tolley had received his wound some time ago.

(Please continue on page 104)

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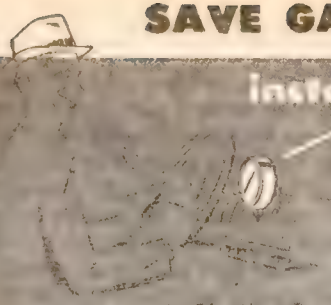

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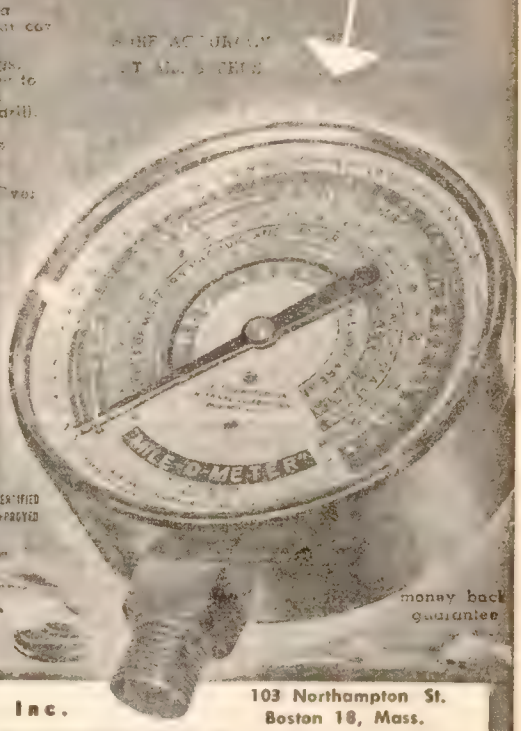

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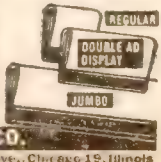

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(Continued from page 102)

Tolley had not gotten through! He was probably lying far out on the plain. This was another item that could be charged indirectly to the renegade scout, Tug Wilson.

"That's how it is," Hardy told the girl. "Tolley didn't get through. If Standin' Tree sticks to his plan and waits for Troop A back in the valley, we've still got time. I don't judge Captain Brady will start before tomorrow morning."

The girl nodded, the sadness that had come with the news of Tolley's death remaining on her face. The sergeant thought that, even discounting the ordeal she had been through, she was still head and shoulders above any girl he had ever known. She had a good, firm, hard jaw and a clean sweep of neckline. Her hair was light and curled at the temples and her eyes were a brilliant gray. He put her age at about twenty-five which would make her five years his junior.

"Why did the mule come to the buttes?" she asked.

"Only water between here and the fort," he said. He built a smoke and sealed it—and something moving out on the plain caught the tail of his eye. He moved around to look closely. The cigarette dropped from his hand, forgotten.

A dense procession of men and horses was moving out over the plain, the dust rising in clouds about them. As he watched, the column split in two, one half continuing directly towards the buttes and the other veering off to the left.

The girl was following his gaze. "What is it," she whispered.

"It's Standin' Tree and his braves," he told her, shortly. "They're headin' straight this way."

"But it can't be," she protested. "The bigger column is turning off to the left."

"That's the women and kids," Hardy said grimly. "The travois is kicking up all that dust. The squaws are splittin' off from the braves, which means that Wilson got his way and Standin' Tree is goin' to war."

He took her arm and turned to the ledge. "We've got to ride for it," he said.

The girl's eyes were startled. "But why? They'll never find us here."

"Because by night they'll be strung out between us and the fort," Hardy told her

(Please continue on page 106)

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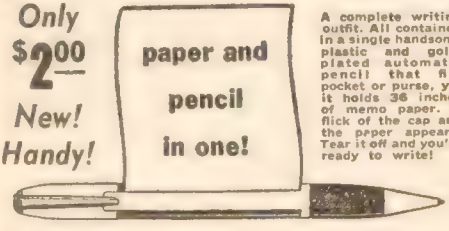

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(Continued from page 104)

tightly. "The Sioux will string along that ridge out yonder and wait for Troop A to walk into them!"

They moved out from the Buttes, the girl on Jeremiah and Hardy astride the saddleless Indian pony. "We'll keep the buttes between us and them," he said, "and maybe they won't spot us until they pass them. If we ride like blazes maybe we can reach the ridge ahead of them."

The girl nodded and kicked Jeremiah in the ribs. She bent over the mule's neck as he got into his low, swinging run, and Hardy sent the pony along beside him.

The ridge ahead was low and sandy, covered with scrub oak and brush. Hardy figured that it was about six miles off. If they could reach that point there were only about five miles more of open country to the fort, and Standing Tree might not venture that close without the advantage of surprise.

They had covered about a mile when a faint shout carried to them through the clear air. Hardy looked back and silently cursed. He had forgotten about the squaws. Cutting off at an angle, they had glimpsed Hardy and the girl, and were now signaling the warriors.

CHAPTER FOUR

Feathered Death

THE sergeant knew now it was an out and out race. He rammed his spurs and slapped Jeremiah across the rump with the flat of his saber. The braves had not yet come around the buttes. Hardy prayed that neither of their mounts put a foot into a gopher hole.

A thin chorus of whoops told him when the braves sighted them. He looked back and saw them coming in an irregular line, the faster ponies already drawing clear of the others. He looked ahead at Jeremiah and saw that the scout's rifle was missing from the boot. The braves would be in range with their rifle long before he could use his pistol.

If the mounts had been fresh he would not have been concerned but the pony's former owner had not spared him in the pursuit of Jeremiah and the mule looked as though he had seen recent hard service.

(Please continue on page 108)

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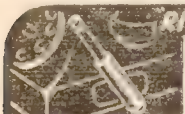

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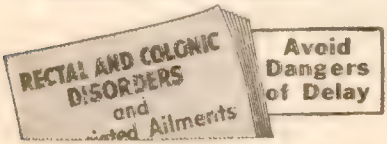

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(Continued from page 106)

He noticed that the girl never looked back, but kept her face straight to the front, getting the most out of the mule. "There's a gal in a million," he told himself. "No fuss and no foolishness."

A little later the report of a rifle split the air. Hardy smiled grimly. "Waste your shots," he muttered. "You'll have to come closer before it'll do any good." He bent low and followed the racing mule.

A mile further on a bullet sang over his head and he knew that they were being overhauled. He looked back and saw that the braves were up to the ancient trick of relaying. A pony would break out from the pack and come on at a killing pace. When he had run himself out another would come up and take his place; thus the quarry ahead had always to go at top speed.

A bullet whizzed close by the sergeant's head. He saw that the lead pony had come within revolver range. He checked the pony in two jumps and swung around. His gun came up and barked twice. The brave on the pony pitched off sideways.

The braves were setting up a constant yelling now that one of their tribe had been killed. The next lead man came up purposefully, undeterred by the death.

Jeremiah was a good hundred yards in the lead now and Hardy rowelled the tough, little pony. But the animal was doing his best and the sergeant could get no more speed from him.

They swept down an incline and took the ridge's upslant, and the mule plunged halfway up. The Sioux warriors came on at a headlong gallop, shouting and firing as they drew closer. Bullets zipped around Hardy and once he felt the pony flinch.

Jeremiah went over the top with bullets kicking up the sand about his heels. Hardy raked the pony's sides with his spurs but the tough little brute was about spent, stumbled to the crest and moved on at little more than a walk.

HARDY turned and emptied his gun at the riders charging up the slope and a bullet creased his shoulder, numbing it and turning his sleeve crimson. He saw one brave fall and felt a grim satisfaction.

They came to the downgrade and the pony took it at a shambling trot. He reached the

level as the pursuit came pelting over the crest. The warriors came down the slope at a mad run, aflame with eagerness now that the chase was almost ended.

Hardy tried to lift the pony into a lope but the animal was dead on his feet. Jeremiah was still out ahead but he was not running so freely. The sergeant shoved fresh cartridges into his gun and knew that the end was not far off.

The Sioux struck the plain in back of the slowly moving pony—and rifle fire smashed out on their left flank. Hardy jerked his head around and saw a charging line of troopers swinging around a bulge of the ridge.

The Sioux wheeled to the right with dismayed shouts. They rode off for a hundred yards and then turned to send their ponies racing for the cavalrymen.

The troop swept past Hardy and the girl and the sergeant heard Captain Brady shout: "Prepare to fight on foot!"

The troopers flung themselves from their horses and, in groups of three, ran back to give the reins to the fourth man. They turned and dropped to one knee and the rifles came up.

Brady barked an order and a volley cracked and rolled with machine-like efficiency. Sioux saddles emptied but the charge was not broken. Dust boiled under the ponies' hoofs and lances gleamed through the screening curtain.

Lead shrieked and whined overhead and here and there a trooper went down. A horse's shrill scream rose high above the tumult. Then trooper and warrior were engaged in a deadly, hand-to-hand encounter. The braves came in striking down at the men afoot and the troopers fought back with small arms and sabers.

Hardy threw himself from the spent pony and cut down a warrior as the brave tried to brain him. For a time men lost touch with their fellows as the fight flowed and swirled, the dust blinding and choking them.

The charge swept past and Hardy heard Captain Brady rallying his men. "Mount and charge!" he roared and the troopers who were able swung into the saddles. They struck the Sioux as they were wheeling for another charge and, sabers out, they tore the line of braves to shreds and swept through it.

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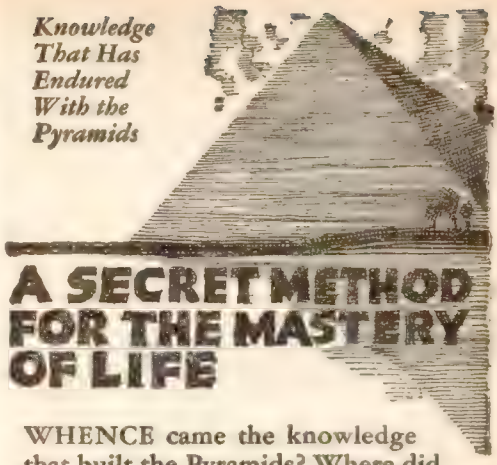

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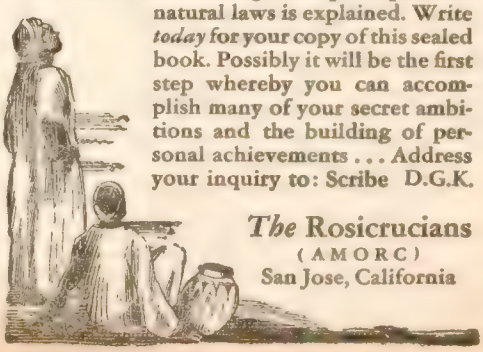

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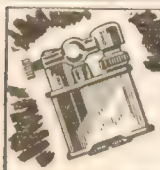

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That did the trick. Standing Tree and his braves had their bellyful of fighting. They clapped heels to the ponies' sides and raced for the shelter of the ridge.

Through the dust and confusion Hardy saw the powerful figure of Tug Wilson edge his horse out in the clear.

Hardy lifted his revolver and fired but Wilson was already beyond pistol range. With bitter anger the sergeant watched him draw away. The renegade was almost to the ridge when a weaving figure stepped out and a long rifle came up. It wavered, steadied and roared lead.

Tug Wilson went off his horse as though hit by a thunderbolt. He struck on his side and rolled. Hardy watched but there was no more movement from Tug Wilson. The man who had shot walked unsteadily to the still figure and looked down at him—then he headed for Hardy.

IT WAS not until he had come within a hundred yards that a great cry burst from the sergeant's throat: "Tolley!"

The sergeant's knees buckled then, and he sat down. Hoofs came to a stop beside him and then the girl was on her knees before him, her fingers working to get his coat off. Things were getting hazy for him and through the mist he said, "You know, I don't reckon I know your name."

"It's Mollie," she said.

The sergeant knew no more. . . .

They were on the parade ground and Sergeant Hardy was standing stiffly at attention.

"And so," Captain Brady concluded, "I have recommended you for a lieutenancy." The captain looked keenly at him as Hardy made no reply. He turned his head and followed the direction of the sergeant's gaze. Sergeant Hardy was staring fixedly at Mollie.

"Of course," the captain said with a twinkle in his eye, "it is not necessary, but I prefer to have my officers married men."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said, coming out of his trance long enough to salute snappily.

Tolly, standing beside Mollie, slapped his thigh.

"That's what I need," he declared. "To dance at a weddin'."

But Mollie was looking at the sergeant and her eyes were saying yes. ✪ ✪ ✪

(Continued from page 50)

why you did it. But, thanks, I didn't want you to."

That got him back on his feet. The smile had brought the vitality into her eyes that always made his spine tingle.

"There's talk—" he began.

"Why don't you get your information from the girl, herself, Rowley?" Matty asked.

He ran his fingers through his yellow hair. He took a turn around the cabin. Then he walked out and down the sidedeck and into the cabin the Old Man had taken.

Mumford was there. He frowned when Rowley walked in.

The Old Man gave Rowley a long and thoughtful look, then growled, "You'd better pack your duds, Watson. I wouldn't trust passengers to a man I wouldn't even trust cattle to, anymore. I was just telling Mumford."

"What's passengers got to do with the *Trojan?*" Rowley asked.

"Not a thing. I'm talking about the *Empress*. Pack your things. You're standing her up to Dalles City, this afternoon."

"You go pack, too, Mumford," the Old Man said.

Mumford rose with a thunderous frown, started to speak, then stalked out.

"Where's he going?" Rowley asked, swallowing hard.

"I don't give two hoots in hell. Scotty Yett's taking the *Trojan*. That guarantees me two good crews." The Old Man rubbed the white stubble on his cheeks. "Matty was right all along."

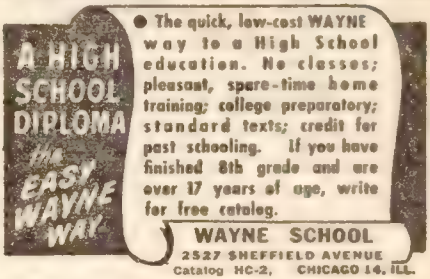
"About what?"

"Mumford. And you. And Scotty. She said it made her nervous riding with Mumford. He didn't inspire confidence. He would make passengers nervous. She was right, too. Mumford had my spine done up like a pretzel while he had the wheel."

"But that dog-leg," Rowley said.

"Come in handy, right there at Wind River," the Old Man said. "I was timing us and Mumford wasn't. Then when Scotty told me that's where you figured we were, too, I was sure of myself. Now, get out of here, Rowley. You've got somebody to thank for a favor. I mean beside Scotty."

Rowley was already on his way to tend to it. ✪ ✪ ✪



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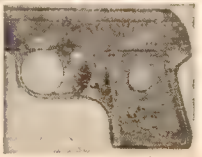

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(Continued from page 58)

"Yeah," Bill said. "Did Dave tell you I took a shot at that killer?"

"Said you claimed you did."

"Ahuh. I winged him, too, and I just thought of something that's sure interesting." He let his eyes slide down over Dave's clean white shirt. "You were wearing a blue shirt this morning. In town, in spite of the fact that it was hotter than hell, you had on a levi jacket, *buttoned clear to your chin!* Now you're sporting the second clean shirt in one day. That blue one got kinda bloody, didn't it, Dave?"

John Baxter, Bill noted, was no longer looking at him. He was staring at Dave, whose face showed nothing.

"You should have rigged up a lie to explain that blood," Bill said, "instead of trying to cover it up. Take your shirt off."

Dave suddenly laughed. "That's a new way to get out of a murder rap! Sure, I'll take my shirt off. I've nothing to hide."

Bill knew a moment of paralyzing doubt. He watched tensely as Dave turned toward Baxter and lifted his hands to his shirt, starting to unbutton it. Then with blinding speed the man whirled back, a short gun snaking out of his belt. Bill fired twice in rapid succession, and both bullets struck Dave in the chest.

The man had hardly hit the floor when Bill was bending over him, ripping his shirt open. A crude bandage covered a spot on his right side, and Bill tore it off, disclosing a shallow bullet gash.

Bill straightened and glared at Baxter, trying to hide the fact that relief had turned him dizzy. "You savvy that business down in the brakes now? You satisfied?"

Baxter nodded jerkily, then said with customary bluntness, "Looks like I need a foreman. You're it."

"Then round up the boys and get back out to that herd," Bill ordered. "You can end this business tonight if you whip up."

For once in his life, John Baxter didn't stop to argue. He got. Bill bumped into a chair and fell onto it, laying his gun on the table and looking up blearily as Jonny hurried into the room with the medicine kit. He tried to focus his eyes on her, but she was still twins.

"Which one of you," he asked owlishly, "would rather marry me?" ✪ ✪ ✪

(Continued from page 73)

Beings who had endured too much, their skins curiously white, like under-rock life, greeted the rescuers with apathy. The filth was unimaginable, here among the starving. Almost half were dead, but none were buried. Parts of the corpses had disappeared. There was a young widow who had seen her husband's heart roasted on a stick.

Reed met a woman. She was thirty-two, and she looked seventy-two. But there was something special in her eyes that made her unlike the others. That thing was sanity. She was James Reed's wife, and he would have wanted her to stay sane. She looked at him with sane, knowing eyes, and fainted. It had been only four months since their parting. There never had been months like that before.

Someone had guarded her to his death—Milt Elliot, another of the Reed teamsters from Illinois, had taken it on himself to protect a microscopic food supply for Margaret Reed and the four children. All still lived. But Elliott himself—or rather, part of Elliott—was dead in the snow outside the hut. The others had felt no fastidiousness about Mrs. Reed's protector.

There was not one, but four rescue parties that winter. It was April before the last living member of the emigrant train was brought down from the high Sierras. He was Keseberg, the Westphalian, who at the end fought his own rescuers, preferring to stay like a pack-rat among the disordered loot and the fresh corpses of his companions, in the newly-melted snow. Later, Keseberg recovered, and became, of all things, a restaurant owner in Sacramento.

Eighty-two persons had gone with James Reed into the better road . . . and at the end of the trail, forty-seven survived, largely due to Reed's own efforts. Thirty-five men, women and children never would see California.

No one blamed Reed for their deaths. If there was any among them who started a new life in the west with a bad name, it was Keseberg, the anti-leader, the dissident. Those who knew Reed later, or who had known him before, understood well enough. Who does not dream, sometimes, of the better, the untraveled road? Reed had made that dream a faith. After him, came the builders and the traffic. ✪ ✪ ✪

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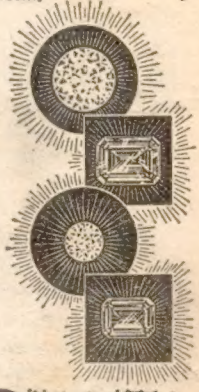

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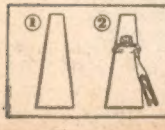

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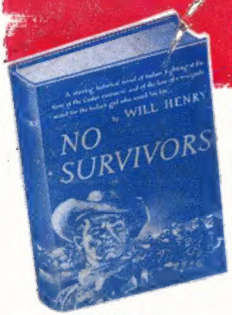

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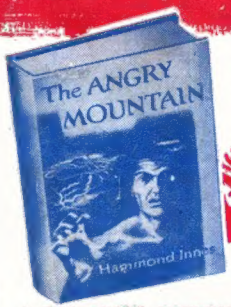

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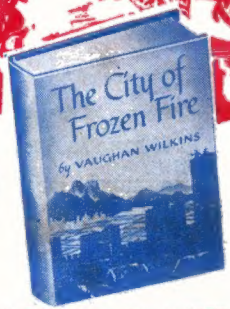

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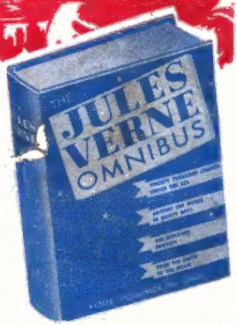

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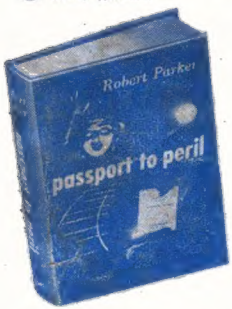

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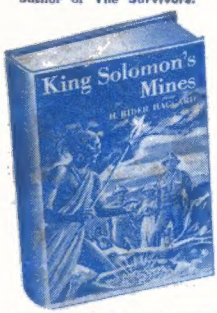

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